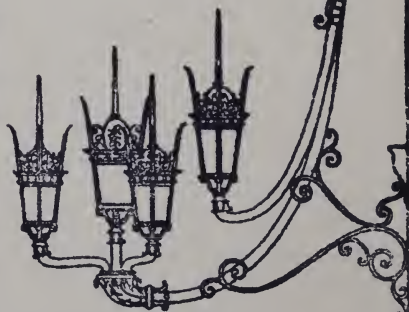


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THE PEACOCK FEATHER

A ROMANCE

BY

LESLIE MOORE

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THE STICK"

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
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To
MRS. G. HERBERT THRING
WITH THE AUTHOR'S LOVE
AND GRATITUDE

September 30, 1913

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THE PEACOCK FEATHER



The Peacock Feather

PROLOGUE

It was sunset.

The sea, which all day long had lain blue and sparkling, was changing slowly to a warm grey shot with moving purple and gold. The sky flamed with crimson and amber. But gradually the vivid warmth sank and faded; day slowly withdrew into the soft embrace of night, and a blue-grey mantle covered sea and sky and land. One by one the stars shone forth till overhead the mantle was thickly powdered with their twinkling eyes.

Away across the water the gleam from the lantern of a lightship appeared at intervals, while every now and then a stronger flash from a distant lighthouse lit up the darkness. It flung its rays broadcast, across the water, across the land, bring-

ing momentarily into startling prominence a great mass of building standing on the top of the cliffs.

In the building a man was clinging with both hands to a couple of iron bars that guarded the narrow opening of his cell window. He could see across the water and up to the star-embroidered mantle of the sky.

Night after night for three years he had looked at that moving water. He had seen it lying calm and peaceful as it lay to-night; he had seen it rearing angry foam-crested waves from inky blackness. He had heard its soft, sighing music; he had heard its sullen roar.

Three years! More than a thousand nights he had looked from that narrow slit of a window, his hands fast clutching the bars, his feet finding slight and precarious foothold in the uneven surface of the wall!

And to-night he looked for the last time. Tomorrow he would be free, free as the sea-gulls which circled and dipped in the water along the rocky coast or rose screaming and battling against the tearing wind.

He slipped down from the window and crossed to his pallet bed.

Free! Until to-night he had never dared even to whisper that word to his inmost soul. Throughout the long three years he had refused to let himself think for more than the day, the moment. He had held his mind in close confinement, a confinement even more stringent than that to which his body was subjected.

Now in that little cell he opened the windows of his soul and let his mind go forth. Radiant, exuberant, it escaped from its cage. It came forth singing a *Te Deum*. Only a few more hours and dawn would break. His body would know the liberty he had already given to his mind. He was too happy to sleep. He lay wakeful and very still on his bed, the silence only occasionally broken by the footfall of a warder in the passage outside.

The night wore on. Gradually the stars dropped back one by one into the sky, and away in the east a streak of saffron light appeared. It was day at last.

Six hours later a man was walking along a country road. His step was light and his face held up to meet the fresh March wind that was blowing across the fields and hedges.

Daffodils nodded their golden heads at him from the banks as he passed, and tiny green buds on the brown branches were pushing forward to the light. The whole world was vital, radiant, teeming with growth.

The man held one hand in the pocket of his grey flannel coat, his fingers pressing on two envelopes which lay there. They had been handed to him just before he left the great grey prison. He had not yet opened them. For one thing, he wanted to put a certain distance between his present self and the past three years before he broke the seals. For another thing, he was denying himself, prolonging the pleasure of anticipation.

Now he saw a stile before him, set in the hedge a little way back from the road, and with a patch of grass before it. In the grass gleamed a few pink-tipped daisies.

The man went across the grass and sat down on the stile. He pulled the two letters from his pocket and looked at them. One was addressed in a masculine handwriting, small, square, and very firm. The other writing was delicate but larger. It was evidently that of a woman.

He opened the firmly addressed envelope first,

and pulled out its contents. A strip of pink paper fluttered to the ground, falling among the daisies. He picked it up without looking at it while he read the contents of the letter.

"I have no desire that you should starve, and therefore send you the enclosed. Kindly understand, however, that I do not wish to see you for the present. When you have partially blotted out the past by obtaining decent work and proving your repentance, I will reconsider this decision.

"RICHARD CARDEN."

The cheque was for two hundred pounds.

The man laughed, but the sound of his laugh was not very pleasant.

He broke the seal of the second letter.

"I did not write before," the letter ran, "because I did not want you to brood over what I have to say, though you must have known that my saying it was inevitable. Of course you have known from the first that you have by your own conduct put an end to our engagement. I did not write at once and tell you so myself, for fear

of adding to your pain. But you must have understood. You will not attempt to see me, or write to me. It would be quite useless. I am going to be married in three weeks' time. I am very sorry for you and I would have helped you if I could, but you must see for yourself it is impossible. There is nothing now to say but good-bye.

“M.”

When the man had finished reading he sat very still, so still that a robin hopped down near him and began investigating the toe of his boot. Finding nothing in a piece of black leather of interest, it flew up to the hedge, and regarded the motionless figure with round beady eyes. At last the figure moved. The robin flew a couple of yards farther away, then perched again to watch.

It saw the man tearing white and pink paper into very small pieces. Then it saw him bend down and dig a hole in the earth with a clasp-knife. It saw him place the pieces of torn paper in the hole and replace the earth, which he pressed firmly down. Then it heard the man speak.

“At least I will give the past decent burial.”

The robin did not understand the words. What

has a gay little redbreast to do with either the past or the future? The moment is quite enough.

Then the man stood up, and the robin saw his face. It had grown much older in the last twenty minutes.

"And now," said the man jauntily, though his eyes belied the carelessness of the words, "for the open road."

Perhaps the robin understood that speech. At any rate it sang a sweet sturdy song of Amen.

CHAPTER I

THE PIPER

PETER was sitting under a hedge, playing on a penny whistle. Behind him was a bush, snowy with the white flowers of the hawthorn. In front of him was a field, warm with the gold of buttercups. Away in a distant valley were the roofs of cottages and a farmhouse. The smoke from one of its chimneys rose thin and blue in the still air. It was all very peaceful, ideally English.

Peter was an artist. It seemed almost incredible that a tin instrument which could be purchased for a penny could be made to produce such sounds.

He was playing a joyous lilt. You could hear the song of birds and feel the soft west wind blowing from distant places; and through it was a measured beat as of feet walking along the open

road. Yet under all the gaiety and light-heartedness lay a strange minor note, a note that somehow found reflection in Peter's blue eyes.

Peter finished his tune and put the whistle-pipe in his pocket. From a wallet beside him he pulled out a hunch of bread and cheese and a very red and shiny apple. He opened a large clasp-knife, cut the hunch of bread in two, and fell to eating slowly. His hands were long-fingered, flexible, and very brown. There was a lean, muscular look about Peter altogether. His clothes were distinctly shabby. They consisted of a pair of grey trousers, very frayed at the edges, and with a patch of some darker material on one knee; a soft white shirt, spotlessly clean; and a loose jacket, grey flannel like the trousers. A felt hat lay on the ground near him. In it was fantastically stuck a peacock feather. Beside the hat was a small bundle rolled up in a bit of sacking.

Peter finished the bread and cheese and the apple, and put the clasp-knife back into his pocket. From another pocket he pulled out a small book, the cover rather limp and worn. He tucked the bundle behind his back and opened the book. Its contents did not long engross him.

The warm May sun and the fact that he had tramped a considerable number of miles since sunrise had a soporific effect on Peter. His fingers gradually relaxed their hold, the book fell to the ground, and Peter slept.

His slumber was so deep that he did not hear the footfall of a man on the soft grass, nor did he stir when the man came near and stood looking down upon him. He was a man of medium height and build, with brown hair, small moustache, and rather light eyes. There was about him an air of finish, yet he quite escaped the epithet of dapper.

For a moment or so he stood looking down upon the recumbent figure. He took in every detail, from the frayed trousers and the spotless shirt to the fantastic feather in the hat. He saw that the sleeper's face was clean-shaven, bronzed, and with rather high cheek-bones. The hair was dark. There was in the sleeping face a look of quiet weariness. To the man watching him it was the face of one who was lonely.

Then his eye fell upon the book. He stooped down and gently picked it up. The book was open at the following lines:

"Sin I fro Love escaped am so fat,
I never thenk to ben in his prison lene;
Sin I am free, I counte him not a bene.
He may answeare, and say this or that;
I do no fors, I speke right as I mene.
Sin I fro Love escaped am so fat,
I never thenk to ben in his prison lene.

"Love hath my name y-strike out of his sclat,
And he is strike out of my bokes clene
For ever-mo; ther is non other mene.
Sin I fro Love escaped am so fat,
I never thenk to ben in his prison lene;
Sin I am free I count him not a bene."

Ten minutes later Peter stirred and yawned. He sat up and began to stretch himself. But in the very act thereof he stopped, and a gleam of humorous amazement shot into his blue eyes, for on the grass beside him a man was sitting, calmly reading from his own rather shabby book.

The man looked up.

"Don't let me interrupt you," said Peter, with a brilliant smile.

The man laughed. "I ought to apologize," he said. "The fact is, when I first saw you lying there asleep I took you for a tramp. Then I

came nearer and saw my mistake. I also saw the book. The temptation to talk to a man who obviously loved the open air and read Chaucer was too much for me. I sat down to wait till you should awake."

"Very good of you," replied Peter. "But you didn't make a mistake, I am a tramp."

"So am I," responded the other, "on a walking tour."

Peter sat up very deliberately now. He broke off a piece of grass, which he began to nibble. Through the nibbling he spoke:

"But I presume that your walking tour is of fairly brief duration; mine has lasted rather more than two years."

The other man looked at him curiously. "You love the open as much as that?"

"Oh, I love the open well enough," replied Peter airily; "but that's not the whole reason. I can't afford a roof."

Now, the very obvious reply to this would have been that Peter, a young man and, moreover, clearly one of education, might very well work for a roof. But it being so extremely obvious that this was what Peter might do, it was also obvious that

there was some excellent reason why he did not do it.

The man was silent. Peter appreciated his silence.

"The fact is," said Peter deliberately, "that prior to my starting this 'walking tour,' as you so kindly term it, I had spent three years in prison for forgery and embezzling a considerable sum of money."

"Ah!" said the man quietly, watching him.

"There are always the colonies," went on Peter carelessly. "But somehow I've a predilection for England. Of course, in England there is the disadvantage that you're bound to produce references if you want work—I mean the kind of work that would appeal to me. I dare say I might get taken on as a day labourer on a farm, but even there my speech is against me; it makes people suspicious."

"But how do you manage?" asked the other curiously.

Peter laughed. He pulled his whistle-pipe from his pocket.

"I pipe for my bread," he said. "They call me Peter the Piper."

The other man nodded. "Good," he said; "I like that. There's a flavour of romance about it that appeals to me. My name's Neil Macdonald."

Peter looked at him. "Then you don't mind introducing yourself to a jail-bird?" he asked jauntily; but there was an underhint of wistfulness in the words.

"My dear fellow," responded Neil, "I have some intuition. It's so absolutely apparent that you must have been shielding some one else, that——"

Peter interrupted him. The pupils of his blue eyes had contracted till they looked like two pinpricks.

"I beg your pardon," he said slowly; "I said that *I* spent three years in prison for forgery and embezzlement." He looked Neil full in the face.

Neil held out his hand. "I apologize," he said; "it was extremely clumsy of me."

Peter took his hand with a light laugh. "It was rather decent of you, all the same," he said, "though, of course, utterly absurd. You're the first man, though, that's committed the absurdity. You happen, too, to be the first man with whom

I've shaken hands since I freed myself from the clasp of a Salvation Army brother who met me outside the prison gates and talked about my soul. I hadn't the smallest interest in my soul at the moment. I wanted a cigarette and a drink more than anything in heaven or earth. He was a good-meaning fellow, of course, but—well, just a little wanting in tact. Of course, there were others ready to hold out the hand of pity if I'd asked for it. But there'd have been something slippery about the touch. The oil of charity doesn't appeal to me."

There was a pause. Somewhere in the blue-ness a lark was singing, an exuberant feathered morsel, pouring forth his very soul in song.

Neil broke the silence. "Pipe to me," he said.

Peter laughed. He pulled the whistle from his pocket, and his fingers held it very lovingly. He put it to his lips.

First there came a couple of clear notes, like a bird-call; they repeated themselves in the distance and were answered. Then the air became alive with the joyous warbling of feathered choristers, and through the warbling came the sound

of little rills chasing each other over brown stones, where fish darted in the sunlight and dragonflies skimmed. Next, across a meadow—one knew it was a meadow—came the sound of little feet and children's laughter. And the sound of the laughter and the babbling of the water and the song of the birds were all mingled in one delicious bubbling melody drawn from the very heart of Nature. It came to a pause. You felt the children, the birds, and the brooks hold their breath to listen. And then from the branches of some tree a hidden nightingale sang alone.

Peter stopped, wiped the pipe on his sleeve, and put it back in his pocket.

"Marvellous!" breathed Neil softly.

Again there was a pause, and again it was broken by Neil.

"I say, will you come back and have lunch with me?" There was a frank spontaneity about the question.

Again the wistful look crept into Peter's blue eyes. The suggestion coming suddenly was evidently somewhat of a temptation.

"I believe I'd like to," he said lightly, "but——"

"Well?" asked Neil.

Peter shook his head. "I think not," he said. "There are quite nine hundred and ninety-nine reasons against it, and only one for it."

"And isn't the one reason good enough to counteract the others?"

Peter laughed. "I fancy not. The high-road has claimed me, the hedge-side is my dining-place, the sky my roof. When it is too unkind to me, I seek shelter in a barn. I've struck up a kind of silent intimacy with cows, sheep, and horses. I've found them, indeed, quite pleased to welcome me."

"It must be horribly lonely," said Neil impulsively.

Peter looked away across the valley. "I wonder," he said. "Perhaps it only appears so. Formerly I walked the earth in company, and when I got near enough to a fellow-creature to believe that I had the right to call him comrade, I suddenly realized that I was looking into the face of a complete stranger. Somehow the loneliness struck deeper home at those moments. Now—well, one just expects nothing."

Neil glanced down at the book he was still holding in his hand.

Peter smiled.

“Love hath my name y-strike out of his sclat,
And he is strike out of my bokes clene
For ever-mo . . .
Sin I am free I count him not a bene,”

he quoted. “There’s a freedom about that, a kind of clean-washedness which is very wholesome; the fresh rain upon one’s face in high places after a room full of hot-house flowers.” He stopped. “Heaven knows why I am talking to you like this,” he said whimsically.

“I don’t fancy,” said Neil calmly, “that you’ve ever been really in love.”

“No?” smiled Peter.

“Of course, you think you have,” went on Neil.

“Indeed?” smiled Peter again.

“Oh, I’m not going to argue with you,” said the other good-humouredly, “only when the time comes that you do love, just do me the favour to remember what I’ve said.”

““He is strike out of my bokes clene,””

quoted Peter again, looking at Neil lazily.

"There is," said Neil, "such a thing as invisible ink. There are certain words written with it on the pages of our lives. The pages look uncommonly blank, but should they chance to catch certain heat-rays, the words written upon them will stand out very black and clear."

"Humph!" said Peter.

"Wait and see," said Neil.

"All right," said Peter. And then he got to his feet. He picked up his wallet, bundle, and the hat with the peacock feather. He put it jauntily on his head.

"I must be moving on," he said.

Neil, too, had risen. He held out the limp book. Peter took it and put it in his pocket.

"Chaucer or you," he said, "which am I to believe?"

"Believe which you like," retorted Neil. "Time will bring the proof. I'm glad I met you." He held out his hand.

Peter took it. "Common politeness," he said, "should make me echo that sentiment. Truth obliges me to hesitate. Yet frankly I like you. Perhaps you have sufficient acumen to guess at the reason for my hesitation. Well, good-bye."

Peter vaulted over a stile that led into the high-road. He turned and waved his hat in the direction of the man looking after him, then started off at a swinging pace. Ten minutes took him into the valley, then he began to ascend. Part way up the hill he turned and looked at the now distant field.

“Oh, damn!” he said half ruefully. “Why the devil did I meet him!”

CHAPTER II

THE FIRST-BORN

It was about five o'clock in the afternoon that Peter entered a small market-town.

There were a good many people in the streets, for it was market-day, and there was an air of leisurely business about the place; completed business chiefly, for already stalls were being dismantled, and unsold butter, eggs, and chickens were being repacked in big baskets. Small groups of men stood about together discussing the weather and the prospect of the various crops. Carts drove slowly down the steep High Street, returning to outlying farms.

Peter walked up the hill. One or two people turned to look at him. Something about him—probably the peacock feather in his hat—attracted attention.

Half-way up the street stood a big red-brick

post-office. It was an imposing edifice, and seemed to dominate the other buildings with an air of Government importance.

As Peter approached it he felt his heart beating quickly. On the steps he paused for a moment. A girl with a small Yorkshire terrier tucked under her arm was just coming out. She saw Peter on the steps, and kept her hand on the swinging door in order that he might enter. There was nothing for it but to go forward quickly and catch the door from her with a murmured word of thanks. Peter was inside the post-office. He approached the counter.

“Are there any letters for the name of Carden?” he asked. And he could hear his heart going klip-klop.

The young woman behind the counter glanced at him. Her look was rather disdainful, and she turned in a nonchalant fashion to the pigeon-holes behind her. She did not think it likely there would be letters. The young man was—A, B, C. She took a parcel and several letters from the pigeon-hole marked C and ran carelessly through them.

Peter saw her stop. She put back several

documents and came towards him. There was a letter and a parcel in her hand.

The girl looked at him. She was a little puzzled. Perhaps her first instinct had been at fault. In spite of the shabby coat and hat and the extremely fantastic feather, he did not look altogether a tramp. She handed the things across the counter.

"Thanks," said Peter. He tried hard to keep a note of excited pleasure out of his voice.

He put the letter into his pocket, but kept the parcel in his hand. He came out of the post-office and turned up the hill, walking rather quickly. He passed shops and some old-fashioned houses in a row. At the top of the street was a big house wall-enclosed. He left it on his right, and passed more houses of the villa order, evidently recently built. Presently they gave place to cottages. Peter quickened his pace, and all the time he was fingering that brown-paper parcel. At last the cottages, too, were left behind, and there was nothing but hedges and fields before him.

Peter turned into one of the fields and sat down on the grass. He took out his clasp-knife and cut the string that held the parcel, pulling forth

the contents. A book, green-covered, with the title in gold lettering, was in his hand.

"*Under the Span of the Rainbow*, by Robin Adair," so the lettering ran. The last was, of course, a pseudonym.

Peter looked at it; then slowly, shyly, he opened the cover.

With almost just such reverence might a mother look on her new-born babe, marvelling at her own creation, and quite regardless of the fact that the same great miracle has been performed times out of number in the world, and will be performed again as frequently.

This was Peter's child, his first-born. Through months of slow travail it had been created and brought forth. Under hedges in the open air, in barns by the light of a single candle, he had worked while dumb beasts had looked at him with mild, wondering eyes. In sunshine and in cloud it had been with him; soft winds had rustled its pages, cold blasts had crept under doors and chilled his fingers while he wrote. And now at last, fair and in dainty garb, it came forth to the world, breathing the clean freshness of open spaces, of sun and wind and rain; tender with the magic of nights,

buoyant with the vitality of sunrise. And yet through it all, as through his piping, lay the strange minor note, the underhint of longing.

Peter looked up. His blue eyes were dancing with happiness.

"Ouf!" he said with a sigh of supreme content, stretching his long lean limbs; "it's good to have done it."

Then he opened the letter. It was merely a typewritten communication from the publishers, informing him that they were sending him one copy only of his book, according to his wish, and were addressing both it and the letter to the post-office he had mentioned. It ended by hoping that the book would be successful, to their mutual advantage.

The businesslike tone of the letter brought Peter down to earth again. He had been temporarily in heaven. The descent, however, was not a jarring one.

He replaced the book in the brown paper, put it carefully in his wallet, and started off across the fields.

CHAPTER III

THE DESERTED COTTAGE

FOR some time there was nothing but open country around him, though in the far distance he saw an occasional farmhouse.

At last, however, he saw the roofs of cottages, and realized that he was approaching a village. The square tower of a church, and a big house half hidden by trees on higher ground beyond the cottages, made it probable that it was more than merely a hamlet.

Just before he reached it a sharp turn in the lane brought him upon a very minute copse set a pace or so back from the road, and in the copse was a small cottage or hut. There was a forlorn look about it, and the windows were broken.

Peter peered through the trees. There was no sign of life whatever. The place was apparently deserted. A couple of yards farther on a small and

broken gate led into the copse. The gate was hanging on one hinge in a dejected and melancholy fashion.

Peter propped it up with a little pat of encouragement before he passed through it and up among the trees to the cottage door. It was unfastened, and Peter went in. He found himself in a small square room. To his amazement it was not empty, as he had imagined to find it. On the contrary, it was quite moderately furnished.

A low bed stood at one side of the room; it was covered with a faded blue quilt. A cupboard with a few tea-things on it stood against one wall. A table, old and worm-eaten, was in the centre of the room. There were two wooden chairs, and a wooden armchair with a dilapidated rush seat. There was a big open fireplace with an iron staple in the wall; from this staple was suspended an iron hook. Both were thickly covered with rust. On the shelf above the fireplace was a clock; it was flanked by a couple of copper candlesticks covered with verdigris. Ragged yellow curtains hung before the broken window.

And everywhere there was dust. It lay thickly on the table and the chairs; the tea-things on the

cupboard were covered with it. It lay upon the floor in a soft grey carpet, thicker at the far side of the room, where the wind through the broken window had swept it in a little drift against the wall.

Peter looked around in bewilderment. During how many years had this dust accumulated? What memories, what secrets, lay buried beneath it?

He looked towards the fireplace. Charred embers were within it. By the hearth lay an old newspaper. Peter picked it up. It tore as he touched it. It bore the date May the nineteenth, eighteen hundred and sixty-six. Forty-five years ago! Had this cottage lain uninhabited for forty-five years?—thirteen years before he was even born! He glanced up at the clock. It had stopped at twelve o'clock—midnight or noon, who was to say?

Peter turned and again looked round the place. At the foot of the bed was another door. He opened it, and found himself in a minute room or scullery. It contained a copper, a row of shelves, a pump, and an iron bucket. The window here, too, was broken, the place as thickly shrouded in dust.

Peter returned to the dwelling-room.

"Apparently I have it all to myself," he said; "and for to-night at least I intend to quarter here, for if I'm not much mistaken there's a storm coming up from the west."

Peter put his wallet and bundle down on the table and went out into the copse. He began collecting bits of dead wood from under the trees, and there was abundance strewn on the ground, also fir-cones, for the trees were Scotch firs. It was already drawing on to dusk, and clouds were being blown across the sky by a soft wet wind from the west.

As Peter had just collected his second armful of sticks, he heard steps coming along the road. He paused before entering the cottage to see who it might be. They were light steps, probably those of children.

In a moment they came in sight—two little girls, chattering eagerly, and walking quickly, for the sky looked threatening. As they neared the copse one of the children looked up. She clutched her companion's arm.

"Look there!" she said. There was terror in her voice.

The other child looked, screamed, and they both set off running frantically down the road.

"Great Scot!" ejaculated Peter; "did they take me for a ghost, or do they think I'm a poacher, and have gone to inform the neighbourhood? Trust they won't disturb me; I've no mind to turn out into the deluge that's coming."

A couple of large drops of rain splashed down on his hand as he spoke, and he re-entered the cottage. He placed his second armful of sticks beside the fireplace. First he cleared away the charred embers in the hearth, then began arranging the newly collected sticks with the skill born of long practice in the art of fire-making. This done, he went into the inner room and took up the bucket. The pump was stiff with rust and disuse, but Peter's vigorous arm soon triumphed over the stiffness, and, filling the bucket with water, he returned to the living-room. Here, with the aid of a couple of ragged cloths, he made a partial onslaught against the dust. The room became at least habitable to one not over-fastidious. Moth, by some miracle, seemed to have left the place untouched, though the bedclothes were damp with mildew.

The cleansing process at least partially achieved, Peter undid his wallet and bundles. From them he took a pot, a tin cup, a couple of eggs, a hunch of bread, and small piece of butter wrapped in a cloth.

He filled the pot with water, put the two eggs in it, and hung it on the hook in the fireplace. Then he struck a match and held it under the pile of sticks. The little orange flame twined itself gently round one twig. It twisted upward to another and yet another. There was the sound of soft crackling gradually increasing to a perfect fairy fusillade. The flames multiplied, leapt from stick to stick, while among their orange and blue light poured a pearly-grey smoke.

"Achieved," said Peter with a sigh, and he seated himself in the armchair watching the dancing flames, and every now and then flinging on an extra stick.

Outside the rain was beating on the roof and splashing through the broken window, while the wind, which had begun to rise, moaned gently through the fir-trees, creaking their branches.

"Thanks be to the patron saint of all wayfarers," said Peter, "that I found this shelter.

And if I knew his name I'd indite a poem to his memory."

And then he fell to thinking of the young man who, earlier in the day, had intruded on his slumbers and read poems from his Chaucer. That he was a pleasant young man Peter had already conceded. That he had combined an extraordinary mixture of intuition with a certain lack of reticence almost amounting to want of tact, Peter also conceded. That there was nothing about him of very deep psychological interest, Peter knew. But—well, he was a man of gentle birth, and he had treated Peter—the wayfaring Peter with frayed trousers and a patch on one knee—as an equal. It had left a very decided sensation of pleasure. Peter acknowledged to himself that he would have liked to accept the young man's invitation; and yet if he had—well, he would probably have driven more than he had done, and he had driven quite enough. That was the worst of unaccustomed and genuine interest from one of your fellow-men. It was like wine to one not used to it—it mounted to your brain, you became garrulous. To those who are used to wine, one glass, two glasses, nay, even

three glasses, means nothing. To those who have not tasted the liquor for years, half a glass may prove unsteady. It was not even as if it would be offered to him with sufficient frequency for him to become accustomed to it. No; most assuredly the wine of sympathy was not for him.

And then he stopped suddenly in his meditations, for the water in the pot was boiling.

When Peter had finished his meal he pulled a brier-wood pipe from his pocket, filled it with tobacco, and lit it. He also lit a candle, which he set in one of the copper candlesticks and placed upon the table. Then once more he drew his book from the brown-paper covering.

For a time he sat very still, only moving a hand to turn the pages. The candle-light threw his shadow large and grotesque on the dingy wall behind him. Occasionally the shadow wavered as the candle flickered in the draught from the broken window. The fire had died down to a few glowing spots set in a bed of grey ashes. Outside the rain fell steadily, and the wind still creaked the branches of the fir-trees.

At last Peter closed the book. He rolled his piece of sacking into a bundle to form a pillow, and

stretched himself on the stone floor before the hearth. It was preferable, he considered, to the mildewy bed.

"I wonder," he mused, "who were the former owners of this place. No doubt they are long since dead. Well, if so, on their souls, and on all Christian souls, sweet Jesu, have mercy!" He made the sign of the Cross.

In ten minutes Peter was asleep. He slept well, but he dreamt, and once or twice through his dreams he heard the sound of sobbing. It was a pitiful little sobbing, as of a woman in grief, and mingled with it seemed to be faint half-articulate words.

Once Peter half-awakened, and for a moment he fancied the sobbing was real, but reason, which was working fitfully, told him it was only the wind in the trees without. He shifted his position and fell asleep again.

CHAPTER IV

PETER TAKES A RESIDENCE

PETER came out from the cottage door in the early morning. The rain of the previous night had ceased, only the trees, bushes, and grass were hung with myriads of drops sparkling silver and diamond in the morning sunshine. He smelt the good smell of the wet earth, and filled his lungs with the cool fresh air.

By rights Peter should by now have been well on his way, for, though his way led generally to no particular goal, he was always afoot by sunrise. But something—Peter did not know what—held him to that cottage. It was almost as if the desolate place cried to him: "Stay with me; I, too, am lonely." Certainly something indefinable but insistent was drawing him to remain.

"And why not?" said Peter half aloud.

And then he heard the creaking of a cart, and

the gruff voice of a carter encouraging his horse. In a moment it came in sight. The cart was empty, and the man was sitting on the side as he drove.

"Good morning," said Peter pleasantly, as the cart and man came abreast of him.

The carter started, pulled up suddenly, and the horse came to a standstill.

"Well now," he said in amazement, "whatever do-ee be doin' there?"

"I sheltered here last night," said Peter. "Can you tell me to whom this cottage belongs?"

The man shook his head. "It don't belong to no one, and that's certain sure."

"But," argued Peter, "a cottage which is obviously built by human agency must have an owner."

Again the man shook his head. "It don't belong to no one," he reiterated.

Peter raised his eyebrows incredulously. "But why not?" he demanded.

"'Tis evil," said the man in a solemn whisper.

"Evil!" echoed Peter. And the word seemed as out of place in the morning sunshine as a cynic would seem in fairyland.

The man nodded. "'Tis evil, for sure. 'Tis haunted."

"And by what is it haunted?" demanded Peter, curious.

"A bad woman," said the man. "Her comes there o' nights, and her moans for that her soul's to hell."

Again the word fell like a discord in the harmony of sunshine and singing birds. Peter frowned.

"Then," he asked, "as the cottage possesses no owner I suppose I can live here if I choose?"

The man scratched his head. "No one can't live there what bain't in league with t'devil," he announced.

Peter smiled brilliantly. "Oh," he said with fine assurance, "but I am." And he made the carter a low bow, sweeping upward his hat, which he had hitherto held in his hand. The fantastic peacock feather came into view, also Peter concluded the bow with a very diabolical grin.

The man whipped up his horse, casting a terrified glance over his shoulder as he drove off. Peter waved his hat with a mocking laugh.

"And now," he said, as the sound of the wheels receded in the distance, "it is possible that my

averred friendship with his Satanic Majesty may gain me uninterrupted possession of this place. And—nonsense or not—it is asking me to stay.”

Suddenly, however, it struck Peter that it might be as well for him to lay in a small store of provisions—if such were obtainable in the village—before the statement of his friendship with the powers of evil had been spread by the too credulous carter. Peter was well aware of the superstitions of village folk. Therefore he set off at once down the road.

The village stood for the most part around an open green, to the left of which was the grey church whose square tower he had noticed the previous day. In front of him and on higher ground, half-hidden among the trees, was a white house. It looked of some importance. On the right of the green was the post-office, and next to it a general provision shop.

Peter went into the post-office, where he asked for a penny stamp.

The woman who kept the place was a buxom dame, rosy-cheeked and brown-eyed. Peter thought she might be possessed of conversational

powers. He was right. A small remark of his received a voluble response. He ventured another. It also was received in good part and the dame's tongue proved nimble.

For full half an hour Peter leant upon the counter, speaking but a word or two at intervals, but finding that they quite sufficed to direct the voluble flow of speech into the channels he desired. The sound of the bell above the shop door alone brought the discourse to a conclusion, as a woman, with a baby in her arms and two children dragging at her skirts, entered. She looked at Peter curiously, then, pulling a shabby purse from her pocket, requested the postmistress to provide her with a penny stamp. She was, so she stated, about to write to her son in South Africa.

Peter came out into the sunlight with vastly more information than he had possessed half an hour previously.

He turned into the provision shop, where he achieved a few purchases, and then made his way again in the direction of the desolate cottage. In his mind he was running through and sorting the information he had received.

First and foremost it was perfectly obvious that,

provided he had the temerity to remain in the cottage in which he had passed the previous night, no one would say him nay. It was held in ill-repute. No one would dream of entering the copse at any time, and after nightfall even the road past it was to be avoided. The reason for this, as far as Peter could gather, was as follows.

Some fifty or sixty years ago a woman had lived in that cottage with her daughter, the reputed beauty of the village. The cottage had been built on a bit of unclaimed land by the woman's husband, who had died soon after building it. It appeared that the girl was a coquette, trifling with the solid affection of the village swains. That at least was the version of the postmistress. One day some young gentleman had come to stay at the inn. What brought him if it was not Satan himself no one knew. At all events, before long he and the village Helen were seen walking together on summer evenings. Then came a day when the young man left the inn, and it was discovered that the girl was missing. Good authority stated that she had gone with him. It also stated that after three months he deserted her. From then began her downfall. The mother, left in the cottage, faded

slowly from grief, and after five years died. On the evening of her death a thin wan woman great with child was seen to enter the village. None, it appeared, had spoken to her. She had passed through the village and towards the cottage where the dead woman lay. The friend who was keeping watch saw the door open and a pale woman with frightened eyes approach the bed. There had been a terrifying shriek and the intruder had dropped to the ground. During the hours of the night a little life had come forth, which looked momentarily and wearily on the world. With a sigh it had gone out again into the silence, where at dawn the weary mother had followed it. But remorse, so it was said, had chained her to the spot where her own mother had died, and throughout the following nights her spirit could be heard sobbing and moaning. For more than forty years the place had been considered cursed, and had been steadfastly avoided. Even the contents of the cottage had remained untouched.

Peter had ventured a word of pity for the desolate creature whose story he had just heard. But pity was, apparently, the last emotion roused towards her. Horror of her sin and degradation, a

horror enhanced by the superstition vivid around her memory, was all the buxom postmistress felt. And should any one be wickedly daring enough to enter the cottage and live there—well, the curse of evil would undoubtedly fall upon him, though assuredly no one would interfere should any one prove himself a sufficient friend of evil for such a venture.

So much had Peter gathered regarding the cottage and its story. He had then put another question regarding the white house on the hill.

It belonged, so he was told, to a Lady Anne Garland, who lived there with a companion. At the moment she was away from home, though she was expected to return in June. And then the other customer had entered the shop, and the flood of the good woman's discourse had been stemmed.

Peter had reached the copse by now and turned in at the broken gate. As he entered the cottage it seemed to him that there was an air of expectancy about the place, as if it was waiting for the answer to a question.

Involuntarily Peter spoke aloud.

"It's all right," he said. "I am going to stay till some one comes to kick me out."

And then—of course it was mere fancy, but a little breeze seemed to pass through the room, like a sigh of relief or content.

CHAPTER V

THE SOUL OF A WOMAN

THUS Peter entered upon his estate, since there was evidently no man would say him nay. He, the wayfarer, who for two years had slept by the hedge-side or in barns, found himself possessed of a castle.

It might be conjectured whether he would find the change cramping, stifling. He did not. The windows, which he mended, he set wide open to the sun and wind. Big fires of sticks and fir-cones aired and freed the place from the odour of damp and decay that hung about it. He took the precaution of buying a couple of blankets and a mattress. Also, as he was once more to become a civilized being, at all events in his own eyes, he bought three suits of the garments called pyjamas.

They pleased Peter enormously. Blue, pink, and

green, he placed them on the table and looked at them. They told him as plainly as their flannel tongues could speak that he had returned to his birthright. He had purchased them in the market town already mentioned, which lay some eight miles distant from the cottage, and the purchase had been made with an air of swagger. Piping had proved a not unremunerative occupation. There was now, however, another source of income. Certainly the income would not be large at present, but it well sufficed. Peter would therefore pipe no longer for pay, but merely for pleasure.

He had also laid in a store of fair foolscap paper and a large bottle of ink. The joy of creation had taken possession of him. His brain was again fertile. It was partly on this account that he had been ready to take up a fixed abode, since fate had flung one in his path. He owed it to the children of his brain to give them every chance, though his first child had been brought forth amidst difficulties and hardships.

The news that a stranger, wearing a peacock feather in his hat, had taken up his abode in the cottage of ill-omen spread like wild-fire through

the village. Women glanced at him with frightened eyes, men regarded him with suspicion. The owner of the provision shop, indeed, held a kind of neutral ground. Until it should be proved that Peter's shillings were accursed, he might as well have the advantage of them.

The children looked at Peter with awe, mingled with curiosity. There was a kind of fearful joy in watching one who was a friend of that terrible personage the Devil. At night, truly, he was to be avoided, but in daylight, with his bronzed face and brilliant peacock feather, he looked not unprepossessing.

Moreover, he could pipe. Wee Rob, the miller's lame son, had first heard him, and had called to the other children. There had been a reconnoitring party down the lane. On tiptoe feet, breath suspended, eyes round with awe, they had gone. Through the bushes they had seen him at the cottage door, the pipe at his lips. And the music had been full of they knew not what of magic, joy and gladness. With parted lips and eyes full of childish wonder they had listened. Fear had vanished to the four winds of heaven, blown far far away by the sweet notes of the pipe.

And then Peter had stopped and moved. There had been the scuttling of little feet and the tapping of a crutch. But the tapping of the crutch had been reluctant in its retreat, for the magic of the piping lingered with Wee Rob.

By day, then, Peter wrote in his cottage, piped his tunes, or walked the moorland above the village. By night he slept and dreamt of the book he was writing, though often through his dreams he fancied he heard the sound of that pitiful sobbing.

In his waking moments he told himself it was fancy pure and simple, yet it troubled him. What if there were indeed an imprisoned soul somewhere seeking aid, one for whom no man had said an individual prayer? Peter had no very definite creed. There lingered with him certain faint memories of lessons taught him by his mother, of which the little prayer he had prayed the first night in the cottage was one. Beyond that all was indefinite, vague. Somewhere external to this world were unseen Powers, some great Force, a Strength to whom men appealed under the name of God. The supernatural, however, had, or appeared to have, no very distinct individual

relation towards himself. He had certainly prayed when he was in the prison. Human aid being powerless to "put things right" (he formulated his ideas no more than that), he had appealed to this External Power. He had found a certain comfort in it. He acknowledged its might, its capacity to do so. Having prayed, he felt sure of the answer. His attitude towards the Powers was friendly. There is no other word which will as well describe his attitude of mind. Surely, then, he had a right to expect a friendly reply. And then the reply had come. For a time Peter had been stunned. It had been so entirely unexpected. He felt almost as a man would feel who had received a blow from one from whom he had a right to expect a handshake. A curious bitterness was his first predominant sensation. This did not last, however. Peter was too innately sweet-natured to harbour bitterness long, even against those vague external Powers of which he knew so little. A nonchalant philosophy took its place. They had failed him, therefore he must turn elsewhere for aid; he must turn to the visible means around him, the things of nature, the sunshine, the trees, the flowers, the birds. In short, the recuperative

power of his own healthy nature sustained him, since the Powers to whom he had turned seemed to have failed. And yet he did not deny their existence. Only it would appear that their attitude towards him individually was not what he had imagined it to be. Now, however, vaguely, indefinitely, he began to wonder whether their aid could not be invoked again, not for himself, but for another, the soul of the woman whose fancied sobbing troubled his dreams. He told himself, as already stated, that the sobbing was pure fancy, the outcome of the pitiful story he had heard, his own imagination, and certain faint memories of his mother's teaching regarding souls in purgatory. Solitude no doubt coloured these memories, rendered him possibly slightly morbid regarding them. Yet the fancy was strong upon him that he, in that place where the soul of the woman had left her body, might in some way aid. Yet how? There was the crux of the question.

And then Peter bethought him of a friend of his, one whose creed, though he himself had inquired little regarding it, he knew to be clear-cut, defined. Perhaps, Peter told himself, his own prayers were

too vague, too nebulous. For himself he was content, or at least sufficiently passive now, to let things remain as they were. For himself, his prayer had failed; he would not be cowardly enough to whine, or recriminate. It was just possible that even the failure belonged to some Great Plan of which he did not see the outcome. He perceived in the same nebulous way that if this were the case rebellion would be not only cowardly, but futile. Yet while remaining passive for himself, something within him stirred him to action for another. He had heard his friend speak of masses for souls in purgatory. It conveyed nothing very definite to Peter's mind, yet he felt that if there were some method of aiding this soul his friend would know of it.

Accordingly Peter wrote a letter. He gave no address; he merely wrote stating the facts of the case, and asking aid. After that he waited.

Now again he was perfectly aware that the whole thing might have been pure fancy, but one day Peter became conscious of a change of atmosphere in the cottage. A repose, a peace, hitherto foreign seemed to have descended upon it. When precisely the change occurred Peter did not know, he

merely suddenly became conscious that the change was there.

Of course it might have been pure fancy, but Peter did not think it was.

CHAPTER VI

AN OLD GENERAL

I

GENERAL CARDEN, V.C., C.B., D.S.O., was sitting at breakfast in his house in Sloane Street. He was not a young man—in fact, he had just passed his seventy-seventh birthday—but there was about him an air of trim spruceness, an uprightness that many a younger man might have envied. His height in his stockinged feet was exactly six feet one. He was handsome, too, with his fine aquiline features, his snow-white hair, and his drooping moustache. His blue eyes, under shaggy eyebrows, were perhaps a trifle faded from the colour of their youth, yet they struck a very decided note in contrast to his face, which was like old ivory, and to the pallor of his hair.

A little pile of letters lay on the table beside him, also a small silver paper-knife. Ten minutes

previously he had cut the envelopes with careful precision and glanced through the contents. Apparently he had found in them little of interest, and now his attention was entirely absorbed by a couple of frizzled rolls of bacon on the plate before him.

The door opened noiselessly and the butler entered. He carried a tray on which was a plate, and on the plate was a small brown egg in a silver egg-cup. General Carden was somewhat particular as to the size and colour of the eggs of which he partook. The butler placed the plate on the table, then stood in an attitude suggestive of military attention.

"Any orders for the car, sir? Alcott is here, sir."

"The car at eleven," said General Carden, still busy with the bacon. "And, Goring, see that those library books are put in."

"Very good, sir. Is that all, sir?"

"Yes; nothing else."

The butler withdrew, and General Carden continued his breakfast. Marmalade and a second cup of coffee followed the egg. General Carden made a good deal of the fact that he

enjoyed his breakfast. It was to him a sign that old age was not yet encroaching.

Breakfast over, he crossed the hall to a small study, where he took a cigarette from a silver box and lighted it. Then he sat down in a chair near the window with the morning paper. It seldom afforded him much satisfaction, however. England, in his opinion, was going to the dogs, and it only annoyed him to see the printed record of its progress towards that deplorable end.

After a few moments he threw the paper from him with a faintly muttered "Damn it, sir!" He had seen that in a by-election a seat had been won by one of the Labour party.

"Going to the dogs, sir; entirely to the dogs!" he muttered. And then he looked out of the window at the people in the street, which street was bathed in May sunshine.

The gardens opposite looked extraordinarily green and spring-like, and nurses with perambulators and children of various sizes were passing along the pavement by the iron railings. They and the sunshine struck a very definite note of buoyancy and youth, and for a moment General Carden felt not entirely as young as he could wish.

The room seemed a little lonely, and the house rather large for one occupant—servants, naturally, did not count. General Carden did not exactly express this thought to his mind in words. He was not a man given to sentimentality either in thought or speech. It was merely represented by a little indefinite and not very pleasant impression. He wheeled his chair round to his writing-desk, which he unlocked, and began looking through various letters with a show of businesslike energy.

Some half-hour or so later he appeared in the hall. The butler was there already with an overcoat, a silk hat, and an air of reserved dignity. He put General Carden into the overcoat and handed him the hat.

“Have you put the books in the car?” asked General Carden.

“Yes, sir,” replied Goring. There was the faintest suspicion of reproof in the reply.

“Ah! yes, of course, of course; I mentioned it at breakfast.” General Carden took up his gloves and passed into the sunshine down the steps, an upright figure in grey overcoat, white spats, and hat shining glossily in the light.

"Good morning, Alcott; the car running well?"

"First rate, sir."

"That's right; that's right. You can take a turn in the Park and afterwards go to Mudie's."

"Very good, sir."

General Carden got in, and the car purred gently up the street.

He settled himself comfortably into a corner, and glanced at the books on the seat opposite to him. He had a subscription at Mudie's, and kept himself thoroughly up in the present-day novel. He did not care to hear a new book mentioned and have to allow that he had not read it. Of course, the present-day literature could not compare with that of the older novelists—that was hardly to be expected. Scott, Dickens, Thackeray—he ran through them in his mind—where was the writer of the moment who could compare with them? Who could touch the romance of Scott, the humour of Dickens, the courtliness of Thackeray? Where was there a man in present fiction able to stand beside the fine old figure of General Newcome? No; romance, humour, courtliness, had vanished, and in their place were divorce accounts, ragging—an appalling

word,—and suffragettes. The world was not what it had been in his young days. He did not, however, express this opinion blatantly; to do so would have savoured of old-fogyism. Oh, no; he flattered himself he kept abreast of the times, and only deplored certain modern innovations, as they were deplored by all those who still held to the fragments of refinement and courtliness that remained in the world.

As the car turned into the Park, General Carden sat rather more upright. He watched the carriages and their occupants with attention, his old eyes keen to observe and note any of them he knew. And when he did, off came that glossy silk hat with a bow and a gesture worthy of a courtier. However much abreast of the times he might choose to consider himself, in his heart he knew he was of the old school, and one even older than that of his own youth. He belonged, this courtly old man, to the delightful old school where men treated women with chivalry and protection, and where women in their turn accepted these things with delicate grace and charm; where conversation had meant a pretty display of wit, a keen fencing of words, where brusquerie was a thing unknown;

and where a fine and subtle irony had stood in the place of a certain curt rudeness noticeable in the present day. Yet all that was of the past. It would be as out of place now as would be one of those dainty ladies of old years, in powder and brocade, among the tight-skirted women in Bond Street. But very deep down in his heart General Carden knew it was the school which he loved, and of which he allowed himself occasionally to dream. Those dreams were dreamt mainly on winter evenings in a chair before the study fire. And then, very surreptitiously, General Carden would bring a tiny gold box from his pocket—a dainty octagon box with an exquisite bit of old enamel, blue as a sapphire, let into the lid—and, opening it, he would take an infinitesimal pinch of brown powder between his first finger and thumb. He was always most extremely careful that no single grain of it should fall on his white shirt-front. Goring's eyes were at times unaccountably sharp. He was not going to be caught snuff-taking by a man who might look upon it as a sign of old age advancing. The little gold box, when not on his own person, was kept locked in a small antique cabinet in his dressing-room.

Apparently there were many people in the Park that morning whom General Carden knew. A big car hummed past with a small woman in it, a woman who looked almost tiny in the car's capacious depths. She had a pointed little face and masses of fair hair. Off came General Carden's hat. This was Muriel Lancing. He had known her as Muriel Grey, when she was a small girl in short skirts. She had married a certain Tommy Lancing a refreshing young man with red hair and freckles and a comfortable private income. General Carden's eyes smiled at the girl. In spite of a certain airy up-to-dateness, he liked her. She was so dainty, so piquante, and such an inscrutable mixture of child, woman of the world, and elfin. One never knew which of the three might not appear on the surface. Also he liked Tommy, who always contrived to put a certain air of deference into his manner towards the General, which secretly pleased that critical white-haired old veteran immensely.

After a few moments he saw another of his friends, and again the hat came off, this time with perhaps even something more of courtliness. The woman in the victoria was very nearly a con-

temporary of his. Quite a contemporary, General Carden reflected—ignoring the fifteen years which lay between them, and which were, it must be stated, to the advantage of Mrs. Cresswell. She was a woman with white hair rolled high, somewhat after the style of a Gainsborough portrait, and a clear-cut aristocratic face. She belonged unquestionably to his school, and their conversations were an invariable delicate sword-play of words. Even if she were generally the victor—and in the art of conversation he was willing to concede her the palm—yet he flattered himself he was no mean opponent, and he had a pleasurable memory of some very pretty turns of repartee on his own part. She was a friend of long standing, and one he valued.

Next came a much younger woman in a car, with a small boy beside her. This was Millicent Sheldon; the boy was her nephew. General Carden's blue eyes were a little hard as he observed her, and there was just a suspicion of stiffness in his arm as he raised his hat. She responded with a slightly frigid bow, her face entirely immovable. There were reasons—most excellently good reasons—why there was a certain chilliness between these

two. They need not, however, be recorded at the moment.

Many other carriages and cars passed whose occupants General Carden knew, also a few foot-passengers, grey-haired veterans like himself, who walked upright and rather stiff, or younger men slightly insouciant of manner.

As his car was turning out of the Park another carriage turned in. In it was a young woman and an older one—much older; in fact, rather dried up and weather-beaten. This time General Carden did not raise his hat, though he observed the two women with interest. He had frequently noticed the carriage and its occupants during his morning drives in the Park. The younger woman attracted him. It was not merely the fact that she was beautiful, but there was an air of distinction about her, a well-bred distinguished air, that appealed to this old critic of women and manners. The men on the box wore cockades in their hats and plum-coloured livery. There was also a tiny coronet on the panel of the carriage door. In spite of the fact that General Carden's sight was not entirely what it once had been, he noticed the coronet. He noticed, too, that the woman's hair was black with

blue lights in it, that her skin was a pale cream, and her mouth a delicious and quite natural scarlet; also that her small well-bred head was exquisitely set on a slender but young and rounded throat, and that it, in its turn, was set quite delightfully between her shoulders. There is no gainsaying the fact that General Carden was a very distinct connoisseur in matters feminine. He wondered who she was, and even after the carriage had passed he thought of her very finished appearance with pleasure. And it was by no means the first time that he had wondered, nor the first that he had experienced the feeling of pleasure at the sight of her.

In two or three minutes, so swift are the ways of cars, he was stopping opposite Mudie's in Kensington High Street. A carriage with a pair of bay horses was waiting beyond the broad pavement outside the shop. General Carden recognized it as belonging to Mrs. Cresswell. Evidently she had left the Park before him.

He got out of the car and crossed the pavement to the shop. Mrs. Cresswell was also changing library books. She saw him approaching and gave him a smile—a smile at once brilliant, gay,

and charmingly intimate, as was the privilege of an old friend.

"So we meet again," she said in her crisp, pleasantly decided voice, and she held out her hand. "And how are you this fine May morning?"

"In most excellent health, thank you," replied General Carden, taking the hand held out to him. "There is no need for me to ask how you are. You look, as you always do, radiant." He accompanied the words with a gesture almost suggestive of a bow.

"How charming of you!" sighed Mrs. Cresswell, a little laugh in her eyes. "I always feel at least ten years younger when I meet you. And you are on the same errand bent as I. Well, here is one book I can certainly recommend. I am just returning it myself. It is by a new author, and is quite delightful—finished, light, and with a style all its own." She held up a green-covered book as she spoke, and General Carden read the gold-lettered title, *Under the Span of the Rainbow*.

Now, to be perfectly candid, the title did not appeal to him who read it. In General Carden's

mind it suggested fairy-tales—light, airy, soap-bubbly things, iridescent and pretty enough for the moment, but quite unable to withstand the finger of criticism he would inevitably lay upon them. Yet the book was recommended by a woman, and that woman Mrs. Cresswell.

“Any recommendation of yours!” said General Carden gallantly. And he put the book aside while he looked for a second one.

A young shopman made various deferential suggestions, and presently Mrs. Cresswell and General Carden were out again in the sunshine, General Carden bearing four library books.

“I shall expect to hear what you think of my recommendation,” said Mrs. Cresswell, as he handed her to her carriage and placed two of the books on the seat beside her. Her voice held perhaps the faintest intonation of significance. “Come and see me next Tuesday; I am at home, you know.”

“With all the pleasure in the world,” replied General Carden.

And then she gave him another of her gracious smiles as the bays moved off down the sunny street.

II

It was not till after dinner that night that General Carden opened the book. He was then sitting in a large and comfortable arm-chair in his study. A shaded electric lamp stood on a table at his elbow, and he was experiencing the sense of well-being of a man who has just partaken of a most excellently cooked dinner.

He fixed his gold-rimmed glasses on his finely chiselled nose and opened the book, though with but faint anticipation of interest. After a page or two, however, he became absorbed, almost fascinated. The writing appealed to him; it was pleasant, cultured. There were here and there some very neatly turned phrases. And then, quite suddenly, one paragraph arrested his attention. It was in itself a quite insignificant little paragraph and merely descriptive. Here it is, however:

“Near one corner of the house, grey-walled, weather-beaten, stood a great pear-tree, its branches almost touching the diamond-shaped panes of the narrow window—the window of the octagon room which held for him so many memories. In spring-time the tree was a mass of

snowy blossoms, and among their delicate fragrance a blackbird sang his daily matins. Later in the year the tree would be full of fruit, many of which fell to the ground, and, bruising in the fall, would fill the air with a sweet and almost sickly scent. In the trunk of the tree was a small shield-shaped patch, where the bark had been torn away, and the initials R. and J. cut in the smooth underwood. They belonged, so the boy had been told, to the twin brothers, whose gallant history had fascinated him from childhood."

General Carden paused. There was a look of dim pain in his blue eyes. After a moment he re-read the passage carefully, and with infinitely more attention than the few sentences would appear to merit. Then he turned to the title-page and read the name of the author. Apparently it told him nothing he desired to know, and he continued his reading. Much farther on he came to another paragraph at which he again paused abruptly.

"'Cricket,' said the young man airily, 'is a universal game, and means, speaking in general terms, the avoidance of anything which—well, hints of meanness or unfair play to our neighbours.'

They were his father's exact words, and he knew it. At the moment, however, he chose to make them his own."

General Carden put down the book. His hands were shaking slightly. He told himself he was an old fool. Hundreds of fathers had used those words to their sons. They represented the first principle learnt by an Englishman. But then, there was the pear-tree, the shield-shaped wound in its bark, the initials, the old weather-beaten house. Memory began to exert her sway. He was sitting in a study window watching a tall, slim woman as she laughed at a thin slip of a boy climbing, monkey-like, among the branches of the old tree. He could hear the very sound of her laugh and the exultant ring of the boy's voice.

He pulled himself together. That house—the old place down in the country—was in the hands of caretakers. It did not do to think about the past at his time of life. He was certainly perturbed to use that phrase. He turned to the address of the publishers, then glanced at the telephone on his writing-desk and from it to the clock. The hands pointed to ten minutes to ten. Of course, it was too late to ring up a business

house, much too late. Besides, pseudonyms were sacred to publishers, or should be. Quite possibly, too, it was not a pseudonym. It was absurd that he should suppose that it was. It was a good book, however, a very good book. He should like to see what the reviews had to say about it. It was always interesting to hear public opinion on a good book; and, to a certain extent, reviewers constituted the public. There were places—he had heard of them—where reviews were collected. He must find out the name of one of them. Yes; he would like to see whether the reviewers did not endorse his own opinion. He would tell Mrs. Cresswell he had appreciated her recommendation. Possibly he would write a note to-morrow and tell her. It would please her to hear that he had liked the book she had advised him to read.

And then another thought struck him, and he sat suddenly upright. Had not she once seen that pear-tree—once, long ago? Surely she, too, did not think—did not guess——

He would not write to her after all. Tuesday would be time enough to tell her that he thought the book—yes, quite fairly promising for a new author. Fairly promising, that was the expression.

CHAPTER VII

A WONDERFUL OFFER

LATE one afternoon Peter set off to walk to the market-town. He was expecting a letter from his publishers. He had given them the market-town post-office as his permanent address. It was a glorious day, and the sunlight lay warmly on the fields.

During the day he had been writing, but his work had not gone well. That which in brain-imagery had seemed original and lifelike, in articulation appeared to him commonplace and dull. Who would care to read the drivel he was committing to paper? His thoughts, his fancies, of what interest would they be to the multitude? Of what value even to two or three?

Peter was in a mood dangerous for his own creation. His first book had come directly from his inner being, written for the pure love of inscribing

in lucid words the thoughts which filled his brain. The same reason had urged him to write again. Then suddenly before him like a menace rose up an image—the Public. His work would go out to it, had already gone out to it. How would it be received? And if with smiles the first moment, who could tell whether the smiles might not the next be changed to frowns?

He felt like a man whose chance witticism has won him the post of Jester. What anxiety must precede each lightly spoken word that follows; the knowledge that the wings of spontaneity had been clipped, though the knowledge perchance was his alone; the inward wince at a rebuff, the joy at applause! Jester to the many-faced public! Was this to be his rôle? Truly, if a little knowledge be a dangerous thing, a little success appeared quite as dangerous. Had he the strength to forget his audience; to speak only as and when Inspiration bade him; to keep silence when her voice was still? If indeed he had to play the part of Jester, could he be a daring one, heedless alike of frowns and smiles? Could he risk the cap and bells being taken from him? Could he bear hooting and derision?

"I will," cried Peter to his soul. "I will jest how and as I please. Servant will I be to Inspiration alone, and slave to none. Away with cowardice, Peter, my son, and dismiss the many-headed public from your mind."

It was therefore in an extremely healthy frame of mind that Peter approached the market-town.

The letter he had expected was awaiting him. He put it in his pocket unopened, for he knew it to be merely a business communication of no particular importance, and set off once more for home.

It was not till after his supper that he again thought of it, and he pulled it carelessly from his pocket. Within the envelope was the typewritten communication he had expected, and also a letter. It was addressed to Robin Adair, Esq., care of the publishers.

Peter turned the letter over curiously. The post-mark was London, the writing educated, delicately firm. He broke the seal and drew the letter from the envelope. Here is what he read:

"LONDON,

"May 16th,

"This letter can have no formal beginning,

inasmuch as it is not written to a man, but to a personality—the personality that breathes through the book signed by Robin Adair. Nor, in spite of appearances, is it a letter from a woman, but from a personality as impersonal—if the contradiction may pass—as that to which it is addressed.

“And in the first place I am trusting that you—for impersonal as one may wish to be, one cannot dispense with pronouns—that you are possessed of sufficient intuition to discover that I am neither an autograph-hunter nor one desirous of snatching a sensation by stolen intercourse with a celebrity. I am not greatly flattering your intuitive powers therein; for nowhere is true personality so intimately revealed as in an intimate letter. Art can almost invariably be detected, and there is no fleshly mask to dazzle the perceptions and obscure the soul. An intelligent abstraction from a letter would probably give the truest image of the subjective side of any nature, which after all is the side with which as an individual one is concerned. If, therefore, after reading thus far, you are disposed to regard this letter as an impertinence, then it is one which is entirely without excuse, and I should desire you to tear it up forthwith.

"If, on the other hand, you have preserved an open mind so far, then I shall not attempt excuse, but furnish you with reasons. In fancy or in reality I have detected in your book, running through its sweetness and underlying all its strength, a great heart-cry for sympathy, the cry of a lonely soul. What it is that has wounded you I cannot tell, but I feel in every fibre that the wound is there.

"Now, I make you an offer—one of intimate comradeship with one of another sex, under conditions of such stringency as Plato's self might have approved. I am a woman whom you have never seen, whom you will never see, of gentle birth, with a share at least of education and refinement, and, moreover, one who has been so profoundly moved and influenced by your writing that she feels with an extraordinary degree of confidence the existence of a mind-*rapport* between herself and you.

"For the moment that is enough. Should you wish to accept my offer, write to me at an address I shall subjoin, whence the letter will be forwarded to me. On your side the compact must be marked by one condition: you must pledge me your word

never to make any attempt to discover my identity.

"As I dislike pseudonyms, I leave this letter unsigned."

Peter laid the letter upon the table and stared at it.

"Amazing!" he ejaculated. Then he took it up again. It was written on bluish paper, and held the faintest—just the very faintest—hint of perfume, lavender delicately fragrant.

"And a woman," said Peter, "has written this letter to me—to me!" His brain whirled slightly. There is no other description for its state at that moment. Gradually it steadied itself. He began to realize the reality of what had happened. He was not dreaming: the letter was actually in his hand, the words traced in a clear and fine writing.

Impersonal, indeed! She—this unknown woman—might call it so if she pleased. To Peter it breathed personality, a personality vivid and rare. Its intimate aloofness—again a contradiction—was full of charm.

An autograph-hunter! Bah! had the merest suspicion of such a thought crossed his mind he

would indeed have been unworthy so much as to lay a finger upon the epistle.

To say that Peter was touched would be a poor way of expressing the emotions that filled him. For years, remember, he had lived in mind-isolation from his fellow-men, and here out of the Invisible came the offer of a soul-intimacy, delicately, graciously made, and made by a woman.

That she was *grande dame* and beautiful his every instinct told him. There was an undernote of assurance about the letter that made the fact convincing. It needed not her statement that she was of gentle birth. Very assuredly she was one accustomed to deference and homage. And she had written thus to him. Wonderful!

Peter got up from his chair, his eyes alight with pleasure. He went to a cupboard and took out a bottle of port and a wine glass. These—like the pyjamas—constituted part of the hall-mark of civilization.

He had bought the wine with the intention of drinking to the health of his published book, but the inclination had passed. There is something unsatisfactory about toasts drunk in solitude.

But now Peter knocked the red seal from the cork and drew it from the bottle. He reseated himself at the table and poured the wine into the glass. He lifted it in his right hand, holding the letter in his left. He approached the glass to the letter, then raised it to his lips.

"To my Unknown Lady!" he said.

Ten minutes later Peter pulled pen, ink, and paper towards him. Oh, the joy of answering this letter, the luxury of it!

And then he began to write, very simply and directly, attempting no well-turned thought or phrase, but writing as he would have spoken, from his heart.

"May 18th.

"Can you, I wonder, have the smallest conception of what your letter means to me? If you have, then perhaps you will realize that my 'thank you' holds in the fullest sense all that those two words can express. Yet please believe that the cry you have detected in my writing escaped from me unawares. Consciously to have made such a plaint would to my mind have savoured of cowardice. May the gods guard me from it!

"Does not Emerson say, 'It is vain to attempt

to keep a secret from one who has a right to know it; it will tell itself'? Dare I believe that you possess that right, that the same spiritual law which has made you conscious of a *mind-rapport* between us has given you the key to it? I accept your offer from my heart. The condition shall be strictly observed.

"Truly you do not greatly flatter my power of intuition when you imagine me possessed of sufficient intelligence to discover that you are neither an autograph-hunter nor anything akin to it. I should be a base dullard had such a thought crossed my mind.

"That my book pleases you affords me intense pleasure. Fresh life will be instilled into my future work by the hope that one day you will read it.

"My pen is halting. I write as I should speak, and my tongue is unaccustomed to speech with a woman of gentle birth. Fate has made of me a recluse—a hermit. I do not revile her. She gives me compensations of which your letter and offer are not the least. Will you write again?

"ROBIN ADAIR.

"P.S.—I am sorry you dislike pseudonyms. This is one."

Peter re-read the letter carefully. He put it in an envelope which he addressed "To my Unknown Critic." He enclosed this in a second envelope, on which he wrote the address he had been given. This again he enclosed with a brief letter to his publishers, asking them to post the enclosure in London. The next day he would take it in to the market-town.

Peter leant back in his chair. Then he poured himself out a second glass of wine, which he drank slowly.

This was a gala night.

Finally he set down his glass and spoke aloud.

"Though the expense is entirely unjustifiable, I shall buy a dress suit."

CHAPTER VIII

CHÂTEAUX EN ESPAGNE

HENCEFORTH Peter walked daily to the post-office in the market-town. And never perhaps has author so eagerly awaited the sight of a letter from his publishers.

For ten days, however, the journeys made by him were fruitless, and he began to cast about despairingly in his mind for the memory of anything in his own letter that could have offended. But he found nothing. His writing, during these days, did not progress. He was too restless, too anxious, to work quietly. Sometimes he sat at his cottage door and piped. Occasionally a small crowd of children would gather outside the hedge, drawn by the magic of the music. The ceasing of the pipe, or any movement on his part, however, was the signal for them to scatter like a flock of frightened sparrows, and he would find the lane deserted.

At last, one evening, his journey to the market-town proved fruitful. A letter awaited him there, also a box bearing the name of a London tailor.

Peter returned across the fields at a fine pace, the letter in his breast pocket, the box under his arm. Arriving at his cottage, he unknotted the string that tied it.

Some twenty minutes later, Peter, in well-cut evening clothes and with a gleaming expanse of white shirt-front, broke the seal of the letter.

You perceive he was a host, receiving in spirit the woman who had deigned to consider him worthy of notice. And now he held the letter in his hand and saw once more the delicate, firm writing.

“LONDON,

“*May 27th.*”

“First I must thank you that you have not misunderstood me. And now that the understanding between us is complete, I can write more freely, more fully.

“So you are a recluse. Perhaps you are to be envied. I have been, and am, in the midst of

that mumming-show society, where we all wear gaily-coloured masks and jest with those around us. We speak little as we feel, but largely as we are expected to speak. Is it part of your compensation that you need not speak at all? For me, I am somewhat weary of the show. It is very gaudy, and the music, I think, too loud. You may ask why I attend it, and to that I have no answer, except that custom demands it of me as a right. How many people, I wonder, act not according to their own individuality, but rather as usage and those around them expect them to act?

“Is it possible, I wonder, to free oneself from tradition, that closely fitting garment placed upon us by our ancestors at birth, which becomes, to the majority, as much part and parcel of ourselves as our skin? Clothed in it, I attend dances, dinners, bridge parties, and theatres, from which I am at the moment recoiling with a kind of mental nausea. Should I strip myself of the garment, shall I not feel cold and shivery—in short, to use a common phrase, feel ‘out of things’? And once the garment is definitely discarded it may not be so easily donned again; at all events, it might not

fit so well. You, a writer, who in your solitude think many thoughts, give me your opinion.

“Mercifully, custom has at least decreed that I should spend some months in the country. In a few days’ time I go down to it. There my individuality resumes what I believe to be its rightful sway. I have a garden. It is, as the poet sings, a thing of beauty, and is to me a joy for ever.

“A summer evening in a flower-scented garden! Can you—you writer of poetic prose—conceive anything more full of charm and delight? I have a bed of night-stocks—poor, dilapidated, withered things in the daytime, and the despair of my gardener. But in the evening on the terrace the odour is entrancing—divine. My thoughts are ‘carried on the wings of perfume into high places.’ You see, I can quote from your book and from memory.

“No; the cry beneath its strength and sunshine was faint, barely discernible. I confess that at the first reading, which I took at a draught, I did not observe it. It was when I returned, as I did, to sip the wine of its poetic fancy that I detected the slightly bitter taste.

Yet bitter is not a fair word to use. Bittersweet would be better, though that barely fits the flavour. The exact word—if one exists—has escaped me.

“You quote from Emerson, and also speak of compensation. Of course, you know this:

“‘We cannot part with our friends. We cannot let our angels go. We do not see that they go out only that archangels may come in. . . . The compensations of calamity are made apparent to the understanding also, after long intervals of time. . . . It permits or constrains the formation of new acquaintances and the reception of new influences, that prove of the first importance to the next years; and the man or woman who would have remained a sunny garden-flower, with no room for its roots and too much sunshine for its head, by the falling of the walls and the neglect of the gardener is made the banian of the forest, yielding shade and fruit to wide neighbourhoods of men.’

“Your quotation made me look up my Emerson. I found your sentence, and went on to read ‘Compensation,’ whence I have copied the above.

“Would your writing have been as human

were it not for the hidden wound you bear? Is it some compensation to know that to one soul at least your words have brought refreshment? What are you writing now?

"I like your pseudonym."

Peter read the letter through twice then put it on the table while he prepared his supper. He laid two places to-night, laughing at himself for the fancy. His Unknown Lady was very present with him, you perceive.

He pretended—and loved the pretence—that she was dining with him. He let himself imagine that a woman, clad in chiffon and lace, and fragrant with that delicate scent of lavender, sat in the chair opposite to him; that the candle-light was playing on her warm hair, finding reflection in her luminous eyes. No palace contained a more courteous host that night than did that little cottage; no royal guest received a greater welcome than did Peter's Dream Lady.

It was a strange, fantastic little scene. Had any one peered through the cottage window, they would have seen a barely furnished room, a meagre supper-table lit by a couple of candles,

and, seated at the table, a man in well-cut evening clothes—a man groomed with the fresh cleanness of a well-bred Englishman. They would have seen a second place laid at the table, and in the second place, between the knife and fork, a bluish letter lying. They would have seen both glasses filled with red wine.

Mad? Not a bit of it! Peter was entirely sane, and very refreshingly healthy. But—and herein lay the difference between him and many of his countrymen—he was possessed of a fine imagination.

And when Peter had drunk the health of his Dream Lady, he began to talk to her; and for this purpose pen, ink, and paper came once more into requisition.

“May 29th.

“Your first letter was welcome; your second is ten thousand times more so. The first was the mere fluttering of a signal, waved at a distance. This evening you are near, and I can speak more easily.

“As for the garment of tradition, I fancy it may at times be discarded by ourselves and

gently, and again donned without fear of it fitting less well. In fact, may it not gain greater value in our own eyes and in the eyes of others by its temporary disuse? It is when fate strips it from us, tearing it to ribbons in the process, that it cannot again be worn, or worn merely as a sorry, ragged semblance of what it once has been. It is then, to use your own parlance, that one feels 'out of things.' I, who write to you, speak from experience. Fate tore my garment from me, and in so doing made the wound you have detected. But enough of that. The touch of your hand upon it has eased its smart, though possibly—nay probably—the scar will remain throughout my life.

"Thank you for your quotation. Yes; I know it. I am glad the shade of my banian-tree—a very small one—has reached you, and its fruit brought you refreshment. The 'ever-onward' note of Emerson is exhilarating. There is no re-pining, no sitting down with folded hands under grief, but an ever pushing forward to the light, as a green shoot pushes aside earth and stones in its journey upward through the soil to the sun.

"Yes, I am writing again; but the last few

days I have done little. I could not tear myself away from the thought of the next letter I should receive from you. Sometimes I feared that none would come, that you might have regretted your offer. It was an unworthy thought; forgive me. Now, I shall write again quietly.

"You ask what it is that I am writing. It is the story of a man, a wayfarer. I do not think there is much plot in the story. Probably all the plot lies in the past which he has thrown behind him. Fate has made of him a wanderer, as she has made a recluse of me. During his wanderings he thinks much. I am endeavouring to record those thoughts as he traverses the fields and lanes. If the gods are good to me, perhaps one day the thoughts may reach you in book form. Then you will give me your opinion on them.

"Soon you will be among your night-stocks in your garden. Their perfume will be more fragrant than the scent of ballrooms and theatres.

"Good-night.

"ROBIN ADAIR.

"Have I thanked you for your letter? I do thank you from my heart."

CHAPTER IX

A REQUEST

SOME evenings later Peter was again a host holding sweet converse with his Lady. Here, first, are her words to him.

“LONDON,

“*June 3rd.*

“The day after to-morrow I shall be in my garden, revelling in its beauty and in the perfume of my night-stocks. The scent of ball-rooms and theatres will be left behind in this big noisy London. It has its fascination, though. This morning the streets were bathed in sunlight, and crowded with women in gay dresses till they looked like a great restless nosegay. We talk of ‘Spring in the country,’ but here its note is just as insistent. In February the Parks were brilliant with crocuses, their hardy little

yellow, white, and purple flowers spreading far under the trees. They were followed by daffodils and tulips, masses of glorious colour. And for sheer beauty give me a sunset across the Parks, or the blue mists veiling the great masses of building. Or, again, the river between sunset and night. Have you ever walked along the Embankment in the evening? I walked there yesterday. Westward the river and sky flamed purple, crimson, and gold; eastward a silver haze covered land and water, with pale lights shining through and reflected in the river. A small boy walking with his mother exclaimed in rapture, 'Oh, mother, look at the lights!' 'What about them, dear?' came the reply. The matter-of-fact tone of the words was indescribable. Thus is the early glimmering of poetry effaced from the infant mind. I write of it lightly. At the moment indignation and tears struggled for the mastery.

"I read the following advertisement in a paper the other day:

"'Wanted, a bright sympathetic woman, not necessarily under 25, as Companion-Help in a family of three. No children, no washing, but the ordinary work of the house to be done.

Must be educated, as she is wanted to be one of the family and help in philanthropic work. Will be needed to do plain cooking, and a "sense of humour" will be appreciated. Salary a matter of arrangement. Protestant.'

"Then followed the address. Doesn't it strike you as rather funny? Can you imagine any one sitting down solemnly to answer it? Testimonials *re* a sense of humour!

"Dear Madam, in my former situations my sense of humour proved a great attraction. I enclose extracts from references. "Jane Smith is the soul of wit." "Our Companion-Help kept us through meal-time in one perpetual roar of laughter." "Laughter is the best digestive sauce. Jane Smith's humour provides that sauce!"'

"I am glad you think I may at times discard my garment of tradition. Now I come to think of it, I believe I did discard it when I first wrote to you. I do not think at that moment the ancestral garment can have been upon me. Talking of that first letter, will you do me a favour? I want you to burn it. It was too solemn, too serious, written with altogether too heavy a pen. Something made me write it, and I am glad of it;

but I was so anxious to place myself above the possibility of a snub that my sense of humour was for the moment obliterated. I took myself and my own importance too seriously. Therefore please destroy it, though it is quite possible that you have already done so.

"I want to read the thoughts of your Wanderer. They should be untrammelled thoughts, wide as the open spaces he is traversing. *When* the gods are good to you I shall look for a copy of the book. I prefer my word to your 'if.'

"My next letter shall be written from my terrace if the sunshine continues in this glory. Good-night."

The letter read, Peter repeated the little ceremony of dining with, and toasting, his Lady. He then proceeded to write to her.

"*June 5th.*

"DEAR LADY,—Thank you for your letter. Doubtless the Muses join with you in your tears and indignation when they see their children stifled at birth. I wonder what 'Mrs. Be-done-by-as-you-did' will have in store for those parents.

Yet their intentions are probably of the very best.

"I should like to see the answers that advertisement will receive. Protestant and philanthropic work, when advertised as such, seem inconsistent with a sense of humour. The person who answers the advertisement will either be devoid of it, or possess it in a very marked degree.

"Why should the first favour you ask of me be one I have not the heart to grant! I cannot burn that letter. I should watch it shrivel and twist in the flames like some protesting living thing. It would be like burning the photograph of a friend. Call me superstitious, idiotic, any name you choose, but I can't do it. I will, however, return it to you, though with great reluctance, and you can do with it as you will. Send me in exchange one of your night-stocks. It will be less shrivelled than your letter had I done as you ask.

"Dear Unknown Lady, when my next book is published—you see, I accept your correction—have I your permission to dedicate it to you? With the exception of the first two chapters, which were written before I knew you, it is written to you and for you alone. My Wanderer speaks

his thoughts directly to you, believing that they will find favour in your sight.

"Though I have churlishly refused the favour you asked of me, will you grant me this one?"

"ROBIN ADAIR."

Peter put the letter into an envelope and addressed it. After a few minutes he came out of the cottage into the little copse.

The June night was very still. The after-glow from the sunset still lingered in the west; the darkness would be of short duration.

Suddenly the sound of wheels struck on Peter's ear, and the quick clear tang of horses' hoofs on the dry road. A few moments later a carriage came into sight, and drove past him towards the village. In spite of the dusk Peter saw that the men on the box wore livery, and a lamp inside the carriage gave him a glimpse of two women's forms. A couple of boxes were strapped at the back of the carriage.

"Without doubt," said Peter to himself, "it is Lady Anne returning."

CHAPTER X

THE LADY ANNE

LADY ANNE GARLAND was sitting by a rosewood writing-desk in her morning-room. She had finished her letters, and was now sitting idle, gazing through the window on to the terrace, and away to the distant woods and hills, which lay serenely blue in the sunlight.

She was dreaming rather than thinking, and a pleasant little dream it would seem, by the half smile in her grey eyes. The sunshine lay along the floor in a broad, vivid patch. It fell across her white dress and on her dark hair, which held the blue-black sheen of a rook's plumage. Her skin was creamy-white, and her mouth, modelled like the mouth of a Greek statue, was of geranium red. In fine, Lady Anne was beautiful.

The sound of the door opening made her turn her head. A small thin woman entered. She

was dressed in a tailor-made dress of some pepper-and-salt material, and wore a black straw hat, rather floppy, and distinctly out of keeping with her otherwise tailor-made appearance. Her hair was grey, and her skin somewhat like parchment, but her eyes and mouth were kindly.

"Finished your letters?" she asked.

"Yes," said Anne, getting up from her desk. "Come into the garden. It is too lovely a day to waste indoors."

She led the way through the French window on to the terrace, and sat down on one of two deck-chairs. Miss Haldane followed her example.

"You should have a hat," she said abruptly.

"No," replied Anne lazily, "I like the sun. I think my skin is too thick to burn. Look at the blueness on those woods and hills; isn't it glorious?"

Miss Haldane put up her eyeglasses and looked at the landscape.

"Very nice, my dear. Jabez said the hay harvest was unusually good this year."

Jabez was the head gardener.

Anne laughed softly. "You are so delightfully practical, Matty dear. If the sun shines

you think of the crops, if the rain falls you think of the crops, if the wind blows you still think of the crops. You missed your vocation when you took up the post of companion to a sentimental dreamer; you should have been a farmer."

"Had the good Lord made me a man, I should have been one," replied Miss Haldane instantly. "As it is, I take an interest in the farming of your tenants. And you must allow that weather is of the first importance to them." She dropped her eyeglasses and looked at Anne.

"I know," owned Anne; "but turnips do not appeal to me. I love my flowers to have their needs supplied, however; and that shows that I am selfish enough to be merely interested in what interests me."

There was a pause.

"The cottage in the copse has found an inhabitant," said Miss Haldane suddenly and abruptly. "I can't call him a tenant because the man pays no rent. I suppose no one knows to whom the rent would be due."

"Really!" exclaimed Anne, replying to the first part of Miss Haldane's speech. "Who has been bold enough to venture there?"

"A vagabond of sorts, I believe," said Miss Haldane. "Of course, the villagers are looking upon him with suspicion and distrust. He wears a peacock feather in his hat and plays the penny whistle.

"How pleasant!" said Anne.

Miss Haldane snorted. "Can't you have him turned out?" she demanded. "I don't think it is a good plan to have a vagabond settling in the village."

"The cottage is not mine," replied Anne; "as far as I know, it is no man's property. Besides, does he do any harm—poach, or anything like that?"

"Not that I know of," returned Miss Haldane. "In fact, they say he buys, and pays for, certain provisions at the village shop."

"Then," said Anne lazily, "he is not a vagabond. A vagabond is one without visible means of subsistence; this man evidently has visible means. I wonder what he is like. I fancied no man would have braved that cottage after nightfall even if he had ventured within at daylight. At all events, superstition has been very rife around it."

"They say he plays the penny whistle beautifully," remarked Miss Haldane.

Anne's eyes twinkled. "You have culled much information since our arrival last night, Matty dear. The man shall come and give us a concert."

"My dear!"

"Why not?" asked Anne carelessly. "An unstudied simple concert on the penny whistle would, I am sure, be full of charm. Burton shall go down to-morrow and request him from me to come up to the terrace."

Miss Haldane was shocked, perturbed. In a word, she fluttered in a manner not unlike an elderly hen with a duckling chick.

"You cannot do it, Anne. You cannot send a footman to the cottage and ask the man to come up here. In the first place, he is probably a socialist, and wouldn't come. In the second place—well, it isn't nice."

Anne laughed outright. "Dear Matty, your favourite adjective! With the negative prefix it applies equally to a burnt pudding, or to a woman who leaves her husband in order to run away with another man. But you're a dear, and I won't laugh at you; and you

shan't be present at the concert if you'd rather not."

Miss Haldane spoke a little stiffly. "If you will be foolish, Anne, I must be present at your folly. It is the only way in which I can merit the liberal salary you give me."

"Dear Matty, what nonsense!" said Anne.

Again there was silence, and it lasted some time. Butterflies flitted in the still air, bees droned lazily in a lime-tree to the west of the terrace, and once or twice a dragonfly skimmed past with a flash of iridescent wings.

Miss Haldane looked at Anne lying back in the deck-chair, which was placed at its lowest angle. Her own was as upright as was consistent with its nature. She had a piece of crochet in her hands, and was working industriously. Matilda Haldane was never idle, and she never lolled. From her earliest years she had been told to "get something useful to do," if there happened to be a single spare moment in the ordinary routine of walks, meals, and lessons. Later she was obliged, on her own account, to get something useful to do, and to keep doing it, if she was to live in the smallest degree as she

imagined a lady should live. There had been nothing extravagant about Miss Haldane's ideas, either, but they had included a seat in a church where sittings were rented and threepence to be placed Sunday morning and evening in the offertory-bag.

The useful occupation which provided her with a means of livelihood had been monotonous—how monotonous only Miss Haldane knew. Then suddenly, and by some intervention of providence, Lady Anne Garland came across her path, and at a moment when Lady Anne was—to use her own parlance—tired of companions who were either entirely opinionated or entirely deprecating, or, worse still, who dissolved into floods of injured tears if told that Anne wished to receive a guest alone.

Something about the little dried-up woman—probably her quiet and indomitable pluck under adverse conditions—appealed to Anne. A month after their first meeting, Miss Haldane found herself transplanted to Anne's London house, with a salary that far exceeded her wildest dreams. The only fly in her ointment was the thought that she did nothing to merit it. Merely to

live in a house, to be waited upon by servants, to eat dainty food, and to drive with Anne in the Parks, seemed to her an utterly inadequate return for the money she received. It was, however, all that Lady Anne wished her to do. After a time she grew accustomed to the fact that this was all that was expected of her. Her own innate dignity and Anne's charming and frank manner prevented her from feeling herself a dependent, and an odd but very sincere friendship was the result.

This was now the third summer that she had sat on the terrace and watched Anne lazing in the sunlight. Her beauty, her youthful vigour, in spite of her present indolent pose, struck Miss Haldane anew.

Suddenly Miss Haldane spoke. "Anne," she said, "I wonder you have never married."

The sound of the luncheon gong followed on the speech. Anne rose from her chair with panther-like grace.

"So do I, Matty dear—sometimes."

"But why don't you?" asked Miss Haldane.

Anne walked to the window. At the window she turned. "Because," she said, mock-solemnnity

in her voice, "though few people realize it, I have a soul."

"Of course you have," replied Miss Haldane seriously; "but what has that got to do with marriage?"

Anne laughed. "Nothing, of course," she replied; "and all the men I happen to know would agree with you. Don't look puzzled, Matty dear, but come and have lunch."

CHAPTER XI

A CONCERT—AND AFTER

I

PETER was partaking of a noonday meal of bread and cheese and beer when a knock came on his cottage door. For a moment or two he thought his ears must have deceived him, and he did not move. But the knock was repeated.

Peter got up and opened the door. A man in footman's garb was standing outside. He looked Peter up and down with a slightly supercilious expression.

"Well?" demanded Peter.

"The Lady Anne Garland wishes you to bring your penny whistle-pipe to the terrace at four o'clock this afternoon, and be punctual," he announced.

It was not precisely the formula in which Lady Anne had worded the message, but Burton

considered it an exact enough paraphrase to be delivered to a mere vagabond. It was in his eyes an even over-courteous method of delivering the message.

"Indeed!" said Peter.

"Four punctual," repeated the man with a slightly insolent air. And he turned from the door.

Had he lingered a moment longer Peter would quite probably have kicked him. Astonishment on Peter's part and a swift retreat on his alone saved him.

"Upon my word!" ejaculated Peter, looking after the retreating figure. Then he went into the cottage and shut the door.

"Insolence or fame," remarked Peter to his glass of beer, "in which light shall I regard it?" And then suddenly he laughed.

After all it smacked finely of medieval days, this command from the lady of the manor to appear before her. Annoyance began to vanish; even the insolence of the flunkey was in the picture. It was fame, there was no question about it.

"And, Robin Adair, you writer of tales, here's a subject made to your hand," he quoted.

Oh, he'd act the part well! A hint more disarray than usual about his costume, his oldest coat and trousers—he had two day suits now, this possessor of a cottage—must certainly be worn, with the peacock feather at its jauntiest angle. He must also allow himself a slight air of swagger, as of one conferring a favour; in appearance the vagabond they regarded him, in manner a Kubelik stepping with assurance before his audience.

Peter began to be pleased, to look forward to the appointed hour with interest. It was the writer in him, the man who sees, in any novel situation in which he may find himself, new material for his pen.

“Fate,” quoth Peter to himself, “is thrusting another rôle upon me.” And then as children—and grown-ups for the matter of that—count cherry stones, he ticked them off on his fingers. “Gentleman, scamp, jail-bird, tramp, author, writer of letters to an Unknown Fair One, and piper to the lady of the manor. Peter, my son, what else have the Fates in store for you?” And then he gave a little involuntary sigh, for after all, was not the chief rôle assigned to him—

the one which superseded all others—that of a lonely man?

“Fool!” cried Peter to his heart. “Does not the sun shine for you, the wind blow for you, and the birds sing for you? Have you not free and untrammelled communion with Nature in all her varying moods?”

But all the same the very enumeration of the many rôles seemed to have emphasized the one more strongly.

At a quarter to four Peter, in his oldest and shabbiest garments, with the peacock feather extremely jaunty in his shabby felt hat and his whistle-pipe in his pocket, set off for the white house on the hill.

It was a still sunny day, like many of its predecessors that summer. June had taken the earth into a warm, peaceful grasp. There was a restfulness about the atmosphere, a quiet assurance of continued heat and sunshine. A faint breeze came softly from the west, barely stirring the leaves on the hedges. To the east were great masses of luminous cloud, piled like snow-mountains, motionless and still. The dust

lay thick and powdery in the lane, whitening Peter's boots; the grass, too, was powdered, but slightly, for there was little traffic this way. Peter, to whom the passing of a vehicle was somewhat of an event, barely ever counted more than two or three in the day.

He left the lane behind him and came out on to the village green. As he passed across it men looked at him suspiciously, and a woman carrying a basket stepped hastily to one side as if she feared contact with him. Peter smiled brilliantly, and raised his hat with an air of almost exaggerated courtliness. One man spat on the ground and muttered something that sounded like a curse, but Peter went on his way apparently unheeding.

He passed the lodge gates and went up the drive, under beeches green, copper, and purple, their trunks emerald and silver in the sunlight. On the terrace to the right of the house he saw two figures, one in white and one in some neutral colour. As he drew near the white-robed figure raised her hand, beckoning him to approach.

Peter came up to the terrace, standing just below on the gravel path. He swept off his

hat and stood bareheaded. Then he looked up and saw Lady Anne Garland watching him.

Peter's heart gave a jump, and for no reason in the world that he could ascribe, beyond the fact that she was beautiful, oh! but undeniably beautiful. She was a young woman, tall and slender, in a white dress, and a crimson rose tucked in her waist-belt. She wore no hat. Her hair shone blue-black, warm and lustrous in the sun.

Of the other woman Peter took little note, beyond observing that she was elderly and looked at him with evident disapproval.

"So you are Peter the Piper?" said Lady Anne in her low, distinguished voice.

"At your service," said Peter.

Lady Anne looked at him curiously. He was altogether different from what she had expected, this man in the shabby clothes, with the brilliant peacock feather, and with the bronzed clear-cut face and sad eyes.

"We have heard," said Anne, and there was an air of royal graciousness in the words, "that you are a marvellous piper. Are you willing to pipe for us?" She smiled at him as she spoke.

And again Peter's heart jumped, and began to beat at a fine rate.

"With all the pleasure in the world," he replied, and he drew the pipe from his pocket.

Anne watched him as he laid his fingers lovingly around it. For a moment or so he stood motionless. And then he began to play.

First Anne heard an ordinary little march, quite conventional, but sufficiently gay and lively. Then it broke into curious discords played in rapid succession. Next followed a minor passage, tense, constrained, as if the strange little air running through it were struggling for greater liberty of expression. Suddenly it found it, blending into a *Te Deum*, grand and glorious. All at once it stopped, breaking again into a succession of strange discords which hurt Anne to hear. There was an instant's pause, as if the first half of his theme were finished. Then, played in the minor key, came a gay song with an under note of marching feet, and through it a wistful yearning as for something lost. The air changed to the major, and was repeated. Then came a little melody played quite separately and on its own account, a little rocking melody, not unlike

a cradle song. It ceased, and a new theme began quite unlike anything that had preceded it. Anne listened with suspended breath. She made no attempt to classify it as she had classified his previous themes. But above and beyond all the others it spoke directly to her heart.

Suddenly she was aware that the music had stopped, and that Peter was looking at her like a man who has just come out of a trance.

Anne's eyes were full of tears.

"Thank you," she said, and she held out her hand.

Peter came forward and took it. Then—it seemed that the action was almost involuntary—he raised it to his lips.

Miss Haldane fairly gasped, sitting upright and grasping the supports of the deck-chair with both hands. The effrontery! the audacity! the—the—she had no further word in her vocabulary with which to express her indignation.

Yet if Lady Anne were displeased she did not show it. She looked at Peter long and curiously, as if seeking for something she might find, something that escaped, eluded her.

"You will come and play to me again?" she asked.

"Perhaps," said Peter thoughtfully. He seemed not yet fully recovered from what had appeared like a trance.

Miss Haldane made an inarticulate sound in her throat. This assuredly surpassed everything. She had been right, quite right, when she had considered he might be a socialist.

"It must of course," said Anne courteously, "be exactly as you wish."

Peter bowed, and the next moment moved away, walking down the avenue of beeches. Anne looked after his retreating figure thoughtfully, wondering.

"Impudence!" gasped Miss Haldane. She felt that her goddess, her divinity, had been insulted.

"No, Matty dear," said Anne, "the man is an artist."

"An artist!" said Miss Haldane. She was unwilling to allow that the music had appealed to her.

"Yes," replied Anne, musing, "an artist! Heaven knows how many faults of construction

there may not have been in his theme. Possibly had I been educated in the technical knowledge of music I should have found it positively bristling with them. I am glad I know nothing of the technique of music. I could listen and appreciate. Don't you understand, Matty dear, how wonderful it was! The man's a genius!"

"Well!" ejaculated Miss Haldane. She got up and moved towards the French window. Before entering she turned suddenly.

"My dear," she exclaimed, "you never paid him!"

"I know," said Lady Anne quietly.

II

Peter walked back to his cottage with his mind in a turmoil.

It had been utterly, entirely different from the scene he had pictured to himself. He had not swaggered, he had not stepped on to his platform with an air of assurance. Something had gripped him, something indefinable and powerful, and he—Peter—had lost the strength to assert his own personality.

It had been there, sure enough, but swayed,

dominated, by something outside, beyond him. It had come out from himself, forced out, it would seem, into the music of his piping. He had played himself, his own story, to this woman on whom he had never before set eyes.

Yet did he not know her? Had he never before seen her? Peter searched the recesses of his memory, penetrating to its remotest corners, but with no avail.

No; in spite of all searching memory remained a blank. Instinct, intuition—call it what you will—said, “You know this woman.” Reason said as firmly, “You do not.”

He had reached his cottage by now. He went in and shut the door. He would work. He wanted to soothe his mind. He would throw himself into the quiet calm thoughts of his Wanderer.

He pulled paper, pen, and ink towards him and turned resolutely to his manuscript. For over an hour he sat with it before him, then suddenly realized that he had written no single word. It was useless to attempt to write in this mood. A vague unrest was upon him.

Peter pushed the papers aside, and leaving the cottage, set off to walk across the moorland.

CHAPTER XII

A DISCLOSURE

The Unknown Critic to Robin Adair

“THE TERRACE,
“June 8th.

“HERE, Robin Adair, is a night-stock from below my terrace. I enclose it while it is white and fragrant. It will reach you brown and shrivelled; but, as you say, less shrivelled than my letter would have been—in fact, as it now is. It lies on the terrace beside me, a little heap of grey powdered ashes. This flower is its resurrected form. It is slighter, subtler, more fragrant than that letter. I began to re-read it, but did not get far; it was too serious, Robin Adair.

“I am, as the above will have told you, writing from my terrace in the cool of the evening. A

lamp in the window of my morning-room affords me light. The sky is grey-blue, and away in the west, Venus, who is an evening star at the moment, is shining calm and peaceful.

"I had a concert on this very terrace yesterday afternoon. A so-called vagabond piped to me, wearing shabby clothes and a peacock feather in his hat. . . ."

Peter laid down the letter a moment. His brain was whirling. Not even on the receipt of the first letter from his Lady had it whirled with such rapidity. Here, then, was the explanation. Of course, he had known her before. He had had glimpses of her mind, her soul, her delicate fanciful imaginings. She had embodied suddenly before him, and unconsciously his soul had recognized her, though reason had urged to the contrary. It was incredible, marvellous! In actual everyday life such things did not happen. Yet here was the proof thereof, finely, clearly traced with black ink on a sheet of bluish note-paper.

He picked up the letter again, and began to read further.

"It was a wonderful concert. Music has

never before so stirred, so moved me. Picture to yourself an ordinary penny whistle, from which divine music was produced. He told a life-story in his piping, yet fragmentary sentences alone reached me. It was as if I were reading a book in a language of which I knew but a few words. Can you understand?

“What there was in the first part of his theme, I know not; but he, that strolling player, had suffered. Part of his theme beat and struggled for liberty like a caged bird, or like an imprisoned mind—a fettered expression. And when the expression, the liberty came—that was what hurt—it was smashed, broken. Can you picture a caged skylark, longing, pining for liberty, then seeing the cage door open, and flying forth into the sunlight, its throat bursting with rapture, only to find itself seized by some ruthless hand, wings torn from its body? Yet the bird was not dead; there was the horror. It lay still, bleeding, apparently lifeless, then lifted its head. Maimed though it was, it would still sing; and its song should be no complaint, but one to encourage and cheer all other injured things. I could have wept for the pluck, the courage of the little creature.

And after a time it began to grow wings—little young wings that carried it just above the earth into the open it loved. It was only a little way, but it meant such a lot to that skylark. It was here, at the end, that the music spoke most directly to my heart. The song the partially healed skylark sang seemed to be sung for me alone, and yet here the translation of the words most failed me.

“The man is an artist. I wish he would play for me again. Yet I dare no more ask him now than I would dare ask Sarasate to come to my terrace and play.

“He—this piper—is living on the outskirts of the village, in a cottage reputed to be haunted. Doubtless he has charmed and soothed the restless spirits by his piping. This is a great deal to write to you regarding an unknown strolling player—though he is not strolling now—but the man himself is unusual, while his music is superb. He struck me as one of gentle birth. His speech was educated, and his whole appearance, in spite of his shabby clothes, refined. I am sure he has a story—one, Robin Adair, that might be worthy of your pen.

"My companion—a dear, but very old-fashioned—resented his behaviour. She thought he did not treat me with sufficient respect, mainly because he did not jump at the proposal of playing to me again. I did suggest I should like to hear him; but to send for him again, to send a footman to fetch him as I did before, would be impossible. I hope Burton delivered my message nicely. I worded it courteously, at all events.

"How goes your Wanderer, and are his thoughts progressing? That you should dedicate those thoughts to me pleases me immensely. I think it an honour that you should care to do so.

"I am glad you did not burn my letter. I am glad you cared enough about it—poor dull thing though it was—to refuse to do so. I did not mean to say this to you, yet I have.

"Good-night."

*Peter (alias Robin Adair) to the Unknown Critic,
whom he now knows to be the Lady Anne
Garland*

"June 10th.

"DEAR LADY,—I am in a contrary frame of mind to-night. I want to write to you, yet am in no mood to do so.

"I have met your vagabond piper, and know him more intimately than you might suppose. He is an impostor, though a harmless one, I grant. His music is not bad, but I doubt his playing to you again. The fellow has a good conceit of himself.

"After all, I find I cannot write to-night. Thank you for the flower.

"ROBIN ADAIR."

The Unknown Critic to Robin Adair

"THE TERRACE,
"June 18th.

"Why are you so hard on my Piper? I do not believe he is an impostor. And as for his music being not bad! Robin Adair, are you one 'who has no music in him, and is not moved by concord of sweet sounds,' or in what way has this man vexed you? The latter I believe to be the solution, Robin Adair, and it is not worthy of you. But I will not write more of him. I have not seen him again, and the villagers speak of him with bated breath as a friend of the Evil One. If he were of my faith, I would ask Father Lestrangle, a kindly man, to call at the cottage. But as he

never hears Mass he is evidently of another way of thinking, and might regard the visit as an intrusion. And for some reason he desires solitude. One dare not therefore intrude. I feel, however, that he is lonely, and have had, perhaps foolishly, a desire to lessen that loneliness.

“The country is very peaceful after London, and I am revelling in my flowers, more especially my roses. They are adoring this unwavering sunshine and the warm nights. The gardeners keep their roots well watered, so they —the roses— do not suffer from thirst.

“I had a letter from a friend of mine the other day, a woman with a surplus of relations all eager and willing to offer good advice and to point out various neat and narrow little paths in which she should walk and from which her soul recoils. After remarking on their latest suggestions, she writes succinctly: ‘The patience of Job was overestimated. His relations died.’

“Why are some people so sure that their plan is the right one, and why cannot they allow others to go their own way, provided, of course, the way does not run strictly counter to the law? In that case, of course, there might be complications.

“Am I being very unoriginal when I lament the little originality there is in the world, or, at all events, in that portion of it which I know? And what little there is, is so frequently mere eccentricity. I believe some people would call it original to discard one’s clothes and walk down Bond Street in war-paint and feathers, though certainly there would be a large majority who would call it merely indecent, and in that case the majority would doubtless be right. I believe I am in a discontented mood this afternoon. There is a discord somewhere in my harmonies.

“Are you in a better mood for recording the thoughts of your Wanderer than for writing to me? I hope so. I am looking forward to reading them. I want something to soothe me. In spite of the peace that lies around me—the quiet peace of Nature—I am restless.

“Write to me, Robin Adair; tell me of your Wanderer.”

*Robin Adair to his one time Unknown Critic, or
Peter the Piper to the Lady Anne Garland*

“June 20th.

“DEAR LADY,—I was churlish when I last wrote.

I know more of your Piper than you suppose. Do not write to me of him, I beg.

“As for my Wanderer, he has escaped me. I intended to keep him entirely to the fields and lanes, but he is off now to a hilltop. He has caught a glimpse of a star, and thinks to gain a closer vision of it from the hill. Poor fool! What will the height of an ant-heap advantage him? There are millions of miles between him and the star. On the hill he will be restless and miserable that he is no nearer. Why could he not keep his eyes to the attainable?—the wayside flowers, the green leaves of the hedges, all that which is common property to prince and peasant alike.

“Long ago in his past—I told you he had a past which he had thrown behind him—he cut himself off from communion with his fellowmen. He did not realize at the moment how complete the severance would be; yet, if he had, I believe he would have acted as he did. There seemed then nothing else that he could do; even now there appears to him nothing else. Maybe he made a great mistake. If he did, he did not suffer alone, there were others who suffered too; there’s the

rub. He did not realize that they would suffer. His optimism in human nature was too great. Now he realizes that there are only the fields and roads for him, only the companionship of birds, beasts, and flowers, to whom his past is unknown and can never be disclosed. His wings were torn from him like the wings of that skylark of which your vagabond Piper piped. True, he, too, grew new wings with which he could rise just far enough above the earth to see the star. But he can never reach it, and, unlike your skylark, he cannot sing cheerfully. Perhaps before he saw the star he might have done so, but now his song lacks buoyancy.

"I fancy I shall have to leave him for a while gazing disconsolately at his star, and start a new book. He has endowed me with too much of his present mood, and who will care to hear the pining of a wanderer for the unattainable? I might bring him from the hilltop, blot out the star from the sky. I have, indeed, already tried to do so, but my Wanderer has moped and sulked. That is the worst of these fiction people. You feed them with your heart's blood, you give them life of your life that they may move as living

creatures and not as mere puppets pulled by strings, and suddenly they escape you. The path you have carefully chosen, in which they are to tread, is refused by them. 'It is the way you have chosen,' they will cry, 'not the way we choose!' And if you protest that their path will be of little interest to the public, they sulk, insisting that, interest or no interest, it is the true path. I will leave this flesh and blood creature on the hilltop. If he bewails the distance of his star from him, I will not record his wailings. I will fashion a puppet, and merely a puppet, and from first to last chapter I will pull the strings myself.

"Therefore I fear that the thoughts of my Wanderer will never be printed to soothe you, nor, I fear, can I be of much use in the matter. I told you he had endowed me with his thoughts. I might be the man himself. He has obsessed me. I tell myself that I will look at his star and worship it from afar, thankful for its benign rays. But his restlessness is upon me. I want to get near it, though I recognize the futility of my desire. I am a fool.

"May I take your friend, with her many rela-

tions, as the puppet for my next story? I will pull the strings deftly, and she shall dance away from them or frolic on their mangled corpses. Which think you she would prefer?

"I find that again my mood for letter-writing is not of the most cheerful.

"Good-night.

"ROBIN ADAIR."

*The Unknown Critic to Robin Adair, or the Lady
Anne Garland to Peter the Piper*

"THE TERRACE,

"June 27th.

"DEAR ROBIN ADAIR,—What is it, I wonder, that has disturbed us both? Some small and unpleasant breeze has ruffled the surface of our mind's lake. Yet your course seems clear. Since your Wanderer desires his star, let him attain it. Let him build a ladder of moonbeams and climb up to it, or if he is too much flesh and blood, too material, for such a feat, let the star descend to him. Are there not falling stars?

"Since writing last I have had a letter from a friend of mine. She is not well, and is feeling lonely. I go to town next Thursday to stay

with her for three weeks, till her sister-in-law can come and join her. Perhaps when I return I shall have regained my old calm. At all events, the stir, the movement of London will serve to shake me out of this mood, which I cannot define, but which is foreign to my nature.

“I wish the vagabond Piper would give me another concert before I go, but I dare not ask him.”

CHAPTER XIII

A MOONLIGHT PIPING

LADY ANNE GARLAND was sitting by her bedroom window. It was wide open, and the perfume of the night-stocks below the terrace rose fragrant in the still air. The atmosphere was darkly luminous, blue and purple, in which the shapes of the trees and bushes stood out softly black in the light of a half-moon.

Away across the park, with its scattered oaks and beeches, she could see masses of woodland lying like dark patches on the distant hills. In the valley the lights in the cottages had been extinguished. One by one they had dropped into the darkness, and now the whole village lay asleep.

Anne leaned her arms on the window-sill and looked out into the night. She had not yet begun to prepare for bed, and she still wore the silver-grey dress she had put on for dinner.

The light from two candles on the dressing-table behind her illumined the room, glinting on silver-backed brushes and silver-topped bottles. The walls of the room were white, and above the bed hung an ebony crucifix with a silver Figure. The black cross stood out in startling relief on the white wall-paper. A table beside her bed held a bowl of crimson roses, an unlighted reading-lamp, and a green-covered book, the title printed in gold letters. Between the leaves was an ivory paper-cutter. The leaves, however, had long since been cut; and for the sixth—the seventh—time Anne was reading *Under the Span of the Rainbow*.

Suddenly Anne's ear was arrested by a sound—a faint sound, but the unmistakable crunch of feet on gravel. The sound came from the drive. She drew back into the room, extinguishing one candle and moving the other so that its light did not illumine the square of open window. Then from behind the curtain she watched and listened.

The sound of the feet drew nearer, and a man emerged from the shadow of the trees in the drive. He walked unfalteringly. It was

not the wary approach of one who fears to be seen.

Below the terrace he halted. Anne quickly extinguished the second candle, and leant a little from her hiding-place by the curtain. The man looked up, the moonlight falling full on his face, and Anne saw that it was Peter the Piper. Her breath came quickly and she watched, herself unseen.

She saw him lift his pipe to his lips, and then the still night became full of music. This time Anne made no attempt to classify his theme—to read a story in the melody. Probably it held none. It was music—music pure and simple, which the Piper was playing for her alone.

Breathless, entranced, she stood and listened. Surely never was such a piping since King Midas of old listened to the flutes of Pan. It was truly Nature's music, the instrument which produced it forgotten. Liquid, caressing, it rose and fell in soft cadences, yet faintly through it throbbed the under-note of pain.

How long it lasted Anne did not know. Suddenly there was a pause. Then came the nightingale's song, one short phrase of pure rapture.

Then silence. Anne saw Peter standing still in the moonlight.

On a sudden impulse she moved and pulled a half-blown crimson rose from the bowl on the table near her bed. She threw it from the window and saw it fall at his feet. She saw him stoop and raise it from the ground to his lips. He looked up, and once more she saw his face.

Anne turned swiftly into the room. A moment later there was again the sound of feet on the gravel, a clear, crisp crunching which receded in the distance.

CHAPTER XIV

LE BEAU MONDE

LADY ANNE GARLAND was sitting in Mrs. Cresswell's drawing-room. It was a charming room, with its domed ceiling, its panelled walls, its long windows, its curtains and brocades of dull orange and glowing brown, with its porcelains, its bronzes, and its masses of yellow and white roses in old china bowls and slender glasses.

Anne herself, in a dress of some gleaming material, pale primrose in colour, was sitting on an Empire sofa. The warm brown of its brocade made a delightful harmony with the colour of her dress—in fact, she looked entirely in keeping with her surroundings. A white-haired man, with blue eyes and wearing faultless evening clothes, was sitting on the sofa beside her; and Anne was asking herself where in the name of wonder she had seen him before. Some-

thing in his manner seemed familiar, or was it, perhaps, his eyes, his keen old blue eyes under their shaggy eyebrows? He had been introduced to her early in the evening, and somehow there had seemed at once a curious and indefinable sympathy between them, one which had sprung to life with the first conventional words they had uttered. Throughout the evening he had monopolized her—unquestionably monopolized her—yet entirely without appearing to do so. And over and over again Anne was asking herself when and where she had seen him before.

She glanced at him now as she slowly waved her fan—a delicate thing of mother-of-pearl and fine old cobwebby lace softly yellow with age. Anne possessed the trick of fan-waving in its subtlest form, a trick—or art—she had inherited from an ancestor of more than a century ago, one Dolores di Mendova, a very noted beauty of the Spanish court, from whom Anne had also inherited her hair, her creamy skin, and her panther-like grace.

General Carden turned and saw that she was watching him. A faint rose colour tinged the ivory of Anne's face.

"I was wondering," she said, explanatory, "where it was that I had seen you before."

General Carden smiled, a gay old smile. "I can tell you where I have seen you, though whether you have deigned to notice me is quite another matter."

"Yes?" queried Anne the fan fluttering to and fro.

"I have frequently seen you driving in the Park," said General Carden. "You in your carriage, I in my car."

"Yes?" mused Anne, still doubtful.

"You do not remember?" asked General Carden. He was frankly disappointed.

"On the contrary, I remember perfectly. I confess I had forgotten the fact till you mentioned it. Yet somehow it does not quite explain—" She broke off.

"Explain?" asked General Carden.

Anne laughed. "Explain the quite absurd notion that I have actually spoken to you before. Something in your manner, your speech, seems almost familiar. I fancied I must have known you—not intimately, of course, but slightly."

"I fear," he regretted, "that I have not had

that pleasure. I shall hope now to be able to make up for my previous loss. You live in town?"

"The greater part of the year," said Anne. "I spend three or four months in the country."

"Which, no doubt, you like," replied General Carden courteously. "Being young, you are able to enjoy it. I prefer London. I only leave town during August, when I go abroad. And the whole time I wish I were in England. An unprofitable method of spending a yearly month of one's life. Once I—" He broke off. "I am too old for travelling now," he ended.

"Isn't that rather—nonsense?" said Anne, with a faint hint of a smile, and glancing at the upright figure beside her.

General Carden straightened his shoulders. She was candid—absolutely candid—in her remark.

"Very charming of you to suggest it, Lady Anne," he said, and he tried unavailingly to keep the pleasure out of his voice. "Perhaps after all——"

"Yes," smiled Anne, "after all, you don't find it quite as disagreeable as you pretend."

"Ah, well!" he said.

There was a pleasant little silence. Anne watched the groups of people in the room, sitting or standing in intimate conversation. There was an atmosphere of airy gaiety about the place, a lightness, an effervescence. Listlessness or boredom was entirely absent. In one of the farthest groups was her friend, Muriel Lancing, with whom she was staying. She was an elfin-like, dainty figure in a green dress, on which shone a brilliant gleam of diamonds. Muriel herself was sparkling to-night like a bit of escaped quicksilver.

Rather nearer was another woman, tall and massive. Her figure was undoubtedly good, but her pose gave one the faintest suspicion that she was conscious of that fact. She reminded one of a statue which had become slightly animated by some accident. Apparently, too, she had never forgotten the fact of having been a statue, and wished other people not to forget it either. Her face was a faultless oval, and her hair worn in a Madonna-like style. But beyond the oval and the hair the Madonna-like impression ceased. Her face was hard, there

was none of the exquisite warmth, the tender humanity seen in the paintings of the Virgin Mother.

General Carden was also looking at Mrs. Sheldon, whom, it may be remembered, he had seen on a previous occasion in the Park, a day now three or four weeks old. Anne noticed the direction of his glance.

"Do you know her?" she asked suddenly, then added as an afterthought, "She is a friend of mine." Anne did not state that it was a friendship of only two years' standing, and one which existed infinitely more on Mrs. Sheldon's side than on her own.

"I once had the honour of knowing her fairly intimately," replied General Carden. "We still exchange bows and civil speeches, but—well, I fancy I remind her of an episode she wishes to forget—a perfectly unimpeachable little episode as far as she was concerned, of course."

Anne glanced at him sideways. There was almost a hard note in his voice, which had not escaped her. She saw his profile clean-cut against the dark panelling of the room. And then a sudden little light of illumination sprang

to her eyes. She had all at once discovered of whom it was he reminded her. There was in his fine old face a very distinct look of the vagabond Piper. It was one of those indefinable likenesses which nevertheless exist, at all events in the eyes of those who chance to see it. It was faint, elusive, and to the majority it probably would not be the least apparent, but Anne now knew that it was this which had puzzled her throughout the evening.

And with the discovery came a sudden mental picture of a man standing in the moonlight with a crimson rose against his lips. It was a picture that had presented itself many times to her mental vision during the last few days, and as many times had been dismissed. It was apt to make her heart beat a trifle faster, to make the warm colour surge faintly to her face. Being unable—or unwilling—to account for a certain picturesque, if too impetuous, impulse which had moved her that moonlight night, she wished to forget it. Yet it had a disturbing way of representing itself before her mind.

In banishing it now her thoughts turned into another trend, which was apt to absorb them

quite a good deal, the thought of that writer of letters and books—Robin Adair. Anne was perfectly aware that this unknown writer occupied a large amount of her mind; it swung and see-sawed between him and the vagabond Piper in a way that was almost uncomfortable and altogether unaccountable. She was not accustomed to have her thoughts encroached on in this way without her will being consulted, and she could not understand it, or she told herself that she could not understand it, and that possibly came to the same thing. At all events, she was undoubtedly in a slight puzzlement of mind. It is the only word to describe her vaguely perplexed state. As now Robin Adair had swung uppermost, his book presented itself to her as a subject of conversation.

She asked General Carden if he had read it. She fancied—it was probably pure fancy—that he started slightly. He glanced, too, at Mrs. Cresswell, who was only a few paces away and quite possibly within earshot.

“Ah, yes,” he replied indifferently. “Mrs. Cresswell recommended it to me—a fairly promising book, I thought.” He was adhering faithfully to the expression.

"Fairly promising!" Anne's voice held a note akin to indignation. "I thought it delightful; clever, cultured, quite admirably written."

General Carden experienced a sensation which might be described as a glow of satisfaction. "Isn't that," he said, "rather high praise?"

"Not an atom more than the book deserves!" responded Anne warmly. "And the reviews on it—I saw two or three—were excellent."

"Indeed!" said General Carden politely. The old hypocrite had no mind to mention that every review ever penned on it was now lying safely locked in his desk, that he knew them all nearly verbatim, that he had gloated over them, exulted over them though with many a little stab of pain in the region called the heart.

"Of course," pursued Anne thoughtfully, "it isn't merely a surface book, full of adventure, movement, and incident; and what incident there is might be termed improbable by those who don't realize that nothing is improbable, nothing impossible. It's in its style, its finish, its—its texture that the charm and beauty of it lie."

"It has certainly some well-turned phrases,"

conceded General Carden magnanimously. He liked her to talk about the book; he longed for her to continue, though for the life of him he could not give her a lead. Yet his grudging admiration—all a pretence though it was, though Anne could not know that—fired her to further defence of the writing, stimulated her to fresh praise.

“There are delightful phrases!” she said emphatically. “It is a modern book, yet with all the delicacy, the refinement, the porcelain-air of the old school. For all that the scenes are laid mainly in the open, and are, as I said, quite modern; it breathes an old-world grace, a kind of powder-and-patches charm, which makes one feel that the writer must have imbibed the finish, the courtesy of the old school from his cradle, as if it must have come to him as a birthright, an inheritance.”

General Carden drew himself up. His blue eyes were shining. “Your praise of the book,” he said, “is delightful. The author”—his eyes grew suddenly sad—“would, I am sure, be honoured if he knew your opinion.”

Anne flushed. Did he not know? Had she

not told him? Though perhaps not in those very words.

"It does surprise me," she allowed, after a second's pause, "that you are not more enthusiastic about it. I should have fancied somehow—slightly as I know you—that it would have entirely appealed to you."

General Carden gave a little cough. "It does appeal to me," he said. "It appeals to me greatly—so much, in fact, that I assumed a certain disparagement in order that I might have the pleasure of hearing you refute me." He had forgotten Mrs. Cresswell, but the words had not escaped her, absorbed though she appeared to be in conversation, and there was the tiniest—the very tiniest—expression of triumph in her eyes.

"Oh!" said Anne, at once puzzled and debating. And then she said, "I am longing to read his next book."

"He has not published another, then?" queried General Carden carelessly. Double-faced that he was, he knew perfectly well that no second book had appeared as yet. Had he not advised Mudie's—naturally not in Mrs. Cresswell's

presence—to supply him with a copy the moment one appeared?

“No,” replied Anne. And she stopped. Had not Robin Adair himself told her that his Wanderer had escaped him, and Heaven knew whether he would ever again be caught, chained, fettered, and imprisoned in the pages and between the covers of a book?

Later in the evening General Carden, taking his departure, said to Anne, “I should like to have the honour of calling on you, if you will allow me to do so.”

And Anne replied: “I should be quite delighted. I am staying now with Mrs. Lancing, and go down to the country in a few days, but I shall return to town to my own house in the autumn.”

“In the autumn, then,” said General Carden, bowing over her hand.

CHAPTER XV

CONFIDENCES

MURIEL LANCING, having partaken of breakfast in her own room, was now lying in luxurious and dainty *négligé* among a pile of extremely snowy pillows. Anne, who had breakfasted in the dining-room some half hour previously, was sitting by the open window talking to her.

"Anne," said Muriel suddenly, glancing at her from beneath lowered eyelashes, "I believe I owe you a confession and an apology."

"Yes?" queried Anne, smiling. "And for what?"

"I wasn't," confessed Muriel, "one bit ill when I wrote to you. I was only mentally sick because I wanted Tommy, and he had to go away on horrid business where I couldn't accompany him—at least, he said I couldn't; and that comes to the same thing—with Tommy." Muriel heaved a prodigious sigh.

"Darling!" laughed Anne.

Muriel wrinkled her porcelain-like brows. "Oh, Anne, life is heavenly! There's only just one long big beautiful moment with me and love and Tommy. But there are ten million years of purgatory to get through when he is away from me, and then I'm soul-sick. And I tell myself I'm a sentimental little fool, but it doesn't do one bit of good. So I wrote to you to come to me till Patricia, who is a cheerful soul, can join me. And I didn't want to tell you it was sheer silly loneliness, so I told you a little white lie," she ended tragically.

"Of course," said Anne serenely. "I knew."

"Did you?" Muriel was half incredulous.

"Yes; your letter just breathed 'I want Tommy' all through it. And as a kind of postscript it added, 'But you're better than nothing to this poor moping person, so for Heaven's sake come.'"

"And I," murmured Muriel pathetically, "thought my letter the height of diplomatic lying."

"On the contrary," Anne assured her, "it was as transparent as a crystal bowl."

For a few moments there was a silence. The

warm sun was pouring through the open window, falling across the bed and the slightly tumbled bedclothes, and glinting on the fair hair of the woman who lay among the pillows. Strictly speaking, Muriel Lancing was not beautiful, she was not even pretty. But there was an odd charm about her thin little face, her great grey-green eyes, and her wide mouth. She had a curious, almost elfin-like appearance. She was not at all unlike Arthur Rackham's pictures of Undine as she lay there in some flimsy and diaphanous garment suggestive of sea-foam. Herself—her whole surroundings—held a suggestion of elusiveness, a kind of cobwebby grace and charm. Tommy—adored of Muriel—once said that the house was like an oyster-shell, rough and ugly on the outside, but inside all soft and shimmery with a pearl in it. It was his most brilliantly poetical effusion, and never likely to be surpassed by him. The only single thing in the room that struck an incongruous note was a large—a very large—photograph frame on a table by Muriel's bed. It was a rough wooden frame, distinctly crooked, and with the glue showing somewhat in the corners. It held a

full-length photograph of an ugly, snub-nosed, but quite delightful-faced young man with a wide mouth and an appearance that rightly suggested red hair and freckles. This was the adored Tommy, and the frame was his own manufacture. Next to the man himself they were Muriel's most treasured possessions.

Anne looked across at it. She had often seen it before, but finding it difficult to discover the most tactful observation to make regarding it, had refrained from making any. This time, however, Muriel seemed to notice the direction of Anne's eyes.

"Tommy made it himself," she said, stretching out one white arm, from which a flimsy covering of lace and gauze-like material fell away, disclosing its slender roundness. She moved the frame to an angle better calculated to show off its superior qualities.

"Really!" said Anne, politely incredulous, but understanding. It explained what had hitherto been a cause for wonderment, namely, why Muriel should choose to disfigure her room with such a piece of furniture. Its size almost calls for the designation.

"Yes," said Muriel proudly, "himself. I think," she continued, contemplating the picture with her head at as one-sided an angle as her recumbent position would allow, "that it is a beautiful frame." There was the faintest suspicion of a challenge in her voice.

"I am quite sure," said Anne in a perfectly grave voice, "that you could not possibly have a frame which you would value more. I know I couldn't if I happened to be you."

Muriel laughed like a contented child. "Anne, you're several kinds of angels, and you have the heavenliest way of saying the right thing and yet speaking the truth. Of course I know that its sides are crooked, and that there are little mountains of glue in the corners. But you should have seen Tommy's face when he brought it to me. The darling was so afraid it was not of quite the most finished workmanship. Oh, Anne, between the comicality of his face and the lop-sided expression of the sticky frame—the glue wasn't quite dry—and the little lump in my own throat for the darlingness of the thought, I very nearly had hysterics. But I hid them on Tommy's waistcoat, and I adore the frame."

"Of course," said Anne, smiling.

Again there was a little pause. Then Muriel spoke suddenly.

"What do you think of General Carden? He monopolized you in the most disgraceful way last night."

"I liked him," returned Anne, calmly ignoring the question of monopoly. "It is delightfully refreshing to meet a man so entirely of the old school of thought and manners."

"I think he's quite a dear," returned Muriel comfortably. "I've known him since I was in short frocks and a pigtail. He was a friend of my father's. They were at Harrow together and afterwards in the same regiment in India. He thinks me—well, just a little flighty, but he doesn't altogether hate me; and he's quite paternally fond of Tommy," she ended with a gay little laugh.

"By the way," asked Anne, curious, "why does he so dislike Millicent Sheldon? It is quite obvious he does dislike her."

Muriel gave a little start. Then she looked at Anne, doubtful, hesitating. "Oh, my dear Anne, don't you know? Somehow I fancied that every one—" She stopped.

"Know what?" queried Anne idly, but interested.

"It's really gossip—if true things are gossip," said Muriel half apologetically; "still, some one is sure to tell you sooner or later since you've met General Carden." Again she stopped.

"But tell me what!" demanded Anne. "Since you've said so much, had you not better give me the rest? Besides, since you say some one is sure to tell me, why not let me hear the story from you? You can sweeten it, add sugar and cream, if you will, or vinegar and spice, if those ingredients will flavour it better."

Muriel laughed. "I'll omit the garnishings; you shall have the facts plain and simple. Millicent was once upon a time engaged to General Carden's son. Then—for certain reasons—she threw him over, and married the highly respectable and bald-headed Theobald Horatio Sheldon, whose money—of which he has a very considerable quantity—was made by inventing those little brush things that are fixed on behind carts and sweep up the dirt in the roads."

"I see," mused Anne, comprehending. "But of course, as I had never met General Carden

before, I naturally did not know that he possessed a son. He did not, either, happen to mention him to me."

"But of course not," said Muriel tragically. "That's exactly where the reasons and the real gossip come in. He spent three years in Portland prison for forgery, or embezzlement, or something of the kind. He's out now, but he was in."

"Oh!" said Anne seriously.

"And," ended Muriel, still more tragically, "General Carden has never seen his son again nor forgiven Millicent for throwing him over. It's rather contradictory, isn't it?"

Anne looked down into the street where a flower-girl was standing on the pavement with a basket full of great white lilies. She contemplated her for a few moments in silence, and seemingly drew conclusions from the flowers. She looked round again at Muriel.

"I think I understand," she said quietly.

Muriel looked at her curiously. "Then it's quite remarkably intelligent of you."

"No," said Anne calmly. "He loves his son and has never forgotten him. She has forgot-

ten him and probably never loved him. That's why he can't forgive her."

"Oh!" said Muriel. "I'm sure you're right that he has not forgotten. He's eating his heart out for him, or I'm much mistaken, and he's too proud to own it by the quiver of an eyelash. We women have the easier time. It's our rôle to keep our arms and hearts open to sinners, and thank Heaven for it."

Anne was again looking at the flowers. She had said she understood, but in reality it was only partly. She did understand General Carden, but Millicent with her serious speeches on nobility and bigness of character was another matter. She voiced her perplexity to Muriel.

"Oh, but Millicent!" said Muriel in a tone that quite disposed of the question.

"Yet," said Anne, "Millicent has always talked as if she would help any one re-make his life, as if it were the one thing she would do, and—" She broke off.

Muriel gurgled. "Oh, Anne darling, you're so big-minded and truthful—in spite of your occasional woman-of-the-world airs, which are only a veneer—that you accept people at their

own valuation. The things that people say they will do are the very things that at a crucial moment they do not do. I think crucial moments are a kind of revolution which turns the other side of the person completely to the fore." And then her tone changed to one of solemn warning. "You, Anne, doubtless consider yourself a luxury-loving woman, to whom the bare prospect of coarse underclothes, cold rooms, ill-cooked food, and commonplace surroundings would be appalling. Yet I firmly believe that if the crucial moment came you would tramp the roads with your man."

"Mmm!" said Anne. And that rose colour stole into the ivory of her face, a colour not unnoticed by the watchful eyes of Muriel. "Perhaps, the roads; but do you think it would carry me to a suburban house with a glass fanlight over the front door? It would be the bigger test. But, and there I think you've omitted a point, how about the second moment, the moment when the crucial moment is passed?"

Muriel raised herself on one arm and spoke firmly. "Love—real love—is one long crucial moment. I speak from experience because I

love Tommy." She tumbled flat again among her pillows, and looked across at Anne to challenge her experience if she dared.

Anne, being of course an unmarried woman with no experience of the kind, merely smiled, a tiny smile which ended in a half sigh.

CHAPTER XVI

LETTERS

*The Unknown Critic to Robin Adair, or the
Lady Anne Garland to Peter the Piper*

LONDON,
July 7th.

DEAR ROBIN ADAIR,—I have met another admirer of your book, a delightful old man of courtly manners of the style of the eighteenth century. At first he assumed disparagement of it, or at the best a faint half-hearted kind of praise, which would, I believe, in any case have roused a spirit of contradiction in me. With your book as the subject I waxed eloquent. I took up the cudgels of defence, and I flatter myself wielded them with dexterity. When at last the flow of my discourse ceased—and I trust I was not too didactic in my observations—he confessed calmly that he had merely assumed disparagement in

order that he might have the pleasure of hearing me refute him! It knocked the wind completely out of my sails. I was left helpless, stranded, entirely at a loss for a suitable reply. I hope I carried off the situation with at least a passable degree of *savoir-faire*, but I have my doubts.

I so frequently find myself addressing really witty and brilliant remarks to my bedpost fully an hour or so after the opportunity of making them has passed, when the witticism, the brilliance, might have been delivered in the presence of another, and have covered me with a dazzling glory. It is humiliating to contrast what one has said with what one might have remarked. You writers have the better time. In silence and solitude you can consider your epigrams, and then place them in the mouths of your fictional people at the psychological moment, and the world is left to marvel at your brilliance.

But to return to my old courtier. He has a sad history, which he hides under a mask of urbane and suave courtliness. He has a son, who—so the story runs—has disgraced their name. The old man being too proud to overlook the disgrace—too proud, perhaps, to stoop and delve for ex-

tenuating circumstances—has cut the son out of his life; but fortunately, or unfortunately, he cannot cut him out of his heart, which is aching, pining, for the lack of him. Why can he not put pride in his pocket and ease his heartache? It's a pitiful little story, and one which has caused my own heart to ache, though quite possibly I should have dismissed it without a second thought if I had not met the old courtier.

The friend with whom I am staying has soothed the spirit of discontent which was awake in me when I last wrote. Her method is entirely unobvious. I think it lies in her own incurably good spirits, and her optimism, both of which are infectious. There is an "everything is for the best in this best of all possible worlds" air about her which is exhilarating.

I have, though, been disappointed in another friend, if I may use the word. Personally I feel there should be another to use. An acquaintance signifies one of whom we have but a passing and superficial knowledge, and a friend some one much closer—very close—the word in its real sense. Am I drawing too fine a point? Perhaps one might use the terms I have heard children use,

“friends,” and “truly friends.” So, to use the first term in application to this woman, I have been disappointed in a friend. She is not what I believed her to be, what I believe she wished me to believe her. It has spoilt, as far as I am concerned the intimacy between us. I cannot re-adjust myself towards her, and I feel myself acting the part of a hypocrite. I have picked up her broken pieces as best I may, and mended them, but I am conscious of the cracks. My mending has not been as neat a job as I could wish. Is it any use trying to mend? Tell me what you think, O Man!

The worst of it is that before she broke I asked her to spend a few days with me in August. During those days I shall be terribly, hideously conscious of the cracks. I shall find myself staring at them with a kind of awful fascination. Pray Heaven she'll not observe it, for if she did I—in the rôle of hostess—would be forever disgraced in my own eyes.

I do not know why I should write all this to you; why I should trouble you with what, I am fully aware, are mere absurdities which any sane and reasonable person would assuredly dismiss without a second thought. May I plead in excuse that

somehow you have taken the position of a "truly friend," one to whom trivialities—which after all make up the greater part of one's life—may be mentioned without fear of a laugh or a snub?

I went to a Beethoven concert the other day. To me he stands head and shoulders above every other composer, living or dead. Does music give you the sensation of colour and form? It does me. That was a purple concert, sphere-shaped. Mozart's music is sapphire blue and shaped like a star. Bach's is dark green and square. Grieg's is pale green with a hint of pink and a slim oval. Wagner's is crimson and purple and shaped like a massive crown. I might go on enumerating, if I did not fear to bore you.

Have you read Conard's life of Beethoven? Do you know Beethoven's own words: "Oh hommes, si vous lisez un jour ceci, pensez que vous avez été injustes pour moi; et que le malheureux se console, en trouvant un malheureux comme lui, qui, malgré tous les obstacles de la nature, a cependant fait tout ce qui était en son pouvoir, pour être admis au rang des artistes et des hommes d'élites?"

Grand, glorious Beethoven! the struggle over all infirmity, the victory, and his lonely yet dramatic death! "Il mourut pendant un orage—une tempête de neige—dans un éclat de tonnerre. Une main étranègre lui fermer les yeux." If I am a hero-worshipper, and it would seem that I am, Beethoven stands in the front rank of my heroes. Read his life—by Conard—if you have not already done so. It is one which every artist, of whatever branch his art, should know.

How goes it with your Wanderer? Is he reconciled to his distance from his star? Or have you let the star fall to his hilltop?

Good-night.

*Robin Adair to the Unknown Critic, or Peter
the Piper to the Lady Anne Garland*

July 9th.

DEAR LADY,—I have re-read your letter more than once. It is—dare I say?—somewhat illogical, and therein most delightfully feminine.

You suggest that your old courtier should ease his heartache. Do you not see that in so attempting he could only bring into his life a thing which

is in his eyes broken? And, however carefully he might mend it, would he not be—as you are—painfully and terribly aware of the cracks? Men, I fancy, choose the wiser way; they throw aside the broken pieces into a neat little dustbin, making no attempt to mend. For, after all, is not the glue which holds the thing together a certain sophism which is always apparent to the repairer, and which is, frequently, not very adhesive? Once broken—in spite of the glue—it is apt to fall to pieces on the slightest handling. No, the dustbin, in my opinion, is the better solution. You, as a woman, doubtless will not agree with me. Women invariably mend, and the majority—less critical than you—fancy they make of the mending a neat job.

Let me offer you one piece of advice. Do not let your heart ache for the story you have heard. It was, no doubt, related to you by another than your courtier, and was soothed, softened, rendered pathetic in the telling. You, in your tenderness, have imagined your courtier as hankering after the broken pieces of his image in the dustbin. Your tender imagination removed, the glamour of pathos round the story would be removed also,

and you would find heartaches and such-like non-existent.

I do not believe that the wind is ever so completely knocked out of your sails—as you say—that you are unable to find some appropriate reply. That is merely your modesty. I picture you as talking with charm, with ease, with brilliance. Witticisms I leave outside the category. They belong to older men and women, and are apt to have a poignant edge foreign to my idea of your words.

I like to think that you count me, as the children say, a “truly friend.” Your friendship—disembodied though it is—has brought me refreshment, happiness. Though for a time my Wanderer had obsessed me with his mood, the obsession is passed. It has passed with him also. He does not desire that the star should fall to him. Its very charm lies in its altitude. Perhaps one day, when he has cast off the mantle of his flesh, he will build himself that ladder of moonbeams, and mount to it. As it is—his mood of discontent passed—he is worshipping, grateful that it shines in his otherwise empty firmament. From the little hilltop—which he found was but an ant-heap—

from the lanes, from the fields, he looks up to it, and addresses to it his thoughts, his fancies. He is once more a cheerful soul, appreciating the earth, the wind, and the flowers. His love and worship he keeps for his star.

I have not read Conard's life of Beethoven, nor, I confess, any writer's life of him. I will make up for the omission without delay. His music I know and love. Your little discourse on colour and shapes in music interests me. I should like to hear more about them. Unknowingly I believe I have had the same thoughts, and I agree with the colours and shapes you assign, with, perhaps, the exception of Grieg's shape. His colour—yes; but I have a fancy that his form is less simple, more a variety of curves. I think I should give the oval—slightly broadened—to Schumann, and in its slim form to Heller. Schumann, by the way, is blue—darker than Mozart, and, though soft in colour, less transparent. Heller is pale yellow. Do you agree?

Write again soon, and tell me everything you will about yourself.

Good-night.

ROBIN ADAIR.

*The Unknown Critic to Robin Adair, or the
Lady Anne Garland to Peter the Piper*

THE TERRACE,

July 16th.

DEAR ROBIN ADAIR,—Here I am once more on my terrace, looking across the garden and the park land towards a small village—whose name I will not disclose—lying half-hidden among the trees in the valley. Occasionally, when I am in a ruminative mood, I wonder at the lives of the inhabitants thereof—the routine of them, with no greater excitement than a visit to the market-town some eight miles distant. True, there is the yearly fair at that place, which is an event of the greatest importance. Every man, woman, and child, except the extremely old and the extremely young, flocks to the town on that day. Every available vehicle is requisitioned and packed with a mass of humanity to the fullest extent of its capacities, and those unable to find conveyance in them, and more stalwart, walk. There are at the fair, so I am told, booths, coco-nut shies, merry-go-rounds, and peep-shows of a fat woman whose age is unknown, but who apparently must be akin to Methuselah, since she has been regarded,

it would seem, by the fathers, the grandfathers, and the great-grandfathers of the present generation. But with the exception of the fair there is absolutely nothing to break the monotony of their lives but the weather and a wedding or a funeral. It's rather appalling to contemplate, isn't it? But they seem content and happy, and that after all is the main thing.

Do you believe in fortune-tellers? I went to one before I left town. I do not think it was great credulity in the art that urged me to consult the sibyl, but merely the fact that the friend with whom I was staying persuaded me into the consultation. I had what is termed a "full reading." The palm of my hand was conned, the cards spread out, and the crystal gazed into. I confess that the affair was, to a certain degree, uncanny. Her description of my house—this one—was extraordinary. It might have been before her as she spoke, and she actually saw me listening to a concert by the vagabond Piper—and not only the concert of which I have told you, but another concert, one he gave me the night before I went up to town, and of which I believe no one was aware but he and I. He came to the terrace

and played below my window. It was quite medieval, and entirely delightful. She saw, too, letters which I was receiving and which were a source of great pleasure to me, and therein she was very assuredly right. But—and I hope you will not be offended—after that she began to mix the Piper and the writer of letters, speaking of them with confidence as one and the same person. I did not enlighten her as to her mistake, as with these sibyls it is better to let them say what they see without interruption, otherwise they are apt to try and tell you what they think you wish to know, what they think you desire to have said. It was curious. And here I will make a confession. I myself have occasionally, and in quite an absurd fashion, confounded the two in my thoughts. Do not be vexed, Robin Adair, for you dislike—or pretend to dislike—the Piper. But it seems to me that the sibyl must have been extraordinary telepathic, and have somehow read my thoughts, and their occasional confusion, in a remarkable degree. She told me a good deal more, no doubt the usual fortune-telling jargon, which would be, I am sure, of little interest to you. Certainly it is not worth repe-

tition. But what I have told you struck me as distinctly queer.

I am rejoiced to hear that your Wanderer—and consequently you—are once more soothed and peaceful. And now that he is so, let him continue to recount his thoughts by the hand of Robin Adair, that I may shortly have the benefit of them.

One day—not to-day—I will write you all my fancies on colour, and I have a good many. Perhaps you are right as to Grieg's form. It is probably more intricate than the oval. Possibly it is a design of many curves. As regards Schumann and Heller, I agree.

I fancy you are wrong about my courtier. He has, no doubt, acted on your dustbin principle, but, all the same, I believe he regrets the action. Of course, I see the justice of your accusation that my letter was illogical, but I cannot begin an argument and a defence now. The day is too warm and lazy for such exertion. The heat-shimmer is bathing the gardens, and the top of my silver ink-bottle is almost too hot to touch. The sun has slanted round, and is frizzling me in a diabolical fashion. Hitherto I've been too indo-

lent to move, but now, if I don't intend to be entirely melted, I must get up and pull my chair into the shade.

Of course fortune-telling is absurd really, at least as far as regards the future. Though I grant that this woman's reading of my thoughts was clever.

Good-bye for the present. The bees are droning a lullaby, and I believe I shall sleep.

*Robin Adair to the Unknown Critic, or Peter
the Piper to the Lady Anne Garland*

July 18th.

DEAR LADY,—I have no theories as to fortune-tellers beyond a, no doubt absurd, dislike to them. I do not care to think of you consulting them. Forgive me for saying so. I am perfectly well aware that I have no smallest right to express an opinion, but—it will out—I wish you wouldn't, and long to beg you not to do it again.

When you are in a less melted mood write me a letter of argument and defence. You will not be able to explain away your illogical statements, but I should much enjoy hearing you try to do so.

I must certainly contradict flatly about your

courtier. I am sure you are wrong. And as I shall cry "Knife" every time you cry "Scissors," let us abandon him as a topic of discussion. Write to me of colours instead.

This is a rude letter, and I know it. But a little incident has rubbed my mental fur the wrong way, and I am—well, cross with myself I believe. Perhaps it would be wiser not to write at all, but not to do so would be to discontinue a little ceremony which I have put in practice since the first day I heard from you. Will you laugh at me, I wonder, if I tell you that every evening your letter arrives I become a host, and toast an invisible Lady who has condescended to dine with me, and after dinner we talk together—through the medium of pen, ink, and paper. Sometimes I like to imagine that the medium is less material, and that my thoughts are carried straight on the wings of fancy to the Lady's terrace. But if they go, can she perceive them? Are they not too clumsy, too material, to find response in her thought-cells? After all, it is but a fancy, and you may quite well smile at both it and my dream dinner-party.

To-night I have not been a good host. I apologize to the Lady. Being the sole guest I

ever receive, I might have treated her with greater courtesy.

ROBIN ADAIR.

*The Unknown Critic to Robin Adair, or the
Lady Anne Garland to Peter the Piper*

THE TERRACE,

July 20th.

DEAR ROBIN ADAIR,—I did not smile—at any rate not ironically. If there was a little smile it was verging close on tears. Are you really so lonely? Somehow I had fancied that when you spoke of yourself as a recluse it was a mere figure of speech. Have you no friends who dine with you, who visit you—no material friends?

The little mental picture your letter called up was pathetic. I wish—well, never mind what I wish. Probably it would be no atom of good. I believe—I am sure—your thoughts do reach me. Send them to me, and I will send mine to you.

*Robin Adair to the Unknown Critic, or Peter
the Piper to the Lady Anne Garland*

July 22nd.

DEAR LADY,—Forget my letter. I did not mean

to drivel. I did not mean to cause you the faintest suspicion of tears. I am not, I believe, a sociable person. My disembodied Lady is more to me than hundreds of material friends. I am utterly and entirely grateful for her invisible presence—and the thoughts she sends me. Whatever you wish must be of benefit. Whatever that unexpressed wish was, I endorse it.

Thank you for your letter.

ROBIN ADAIR.

CHAPTER XVII

A THUNDERSTORM

"There is a Lady sweet and kind,
Was never face so pleased my mind,
I did but see her passing by,
And yet I love her till I die,"

sang Peter, in a pleasant tenor voice.

He was sitting by the window of his cottage, engaged—truth will out—in darning a pair of green socks. Occasionally he lifted his head from his work and gazed through the window. It was intensely still outside; not a leaf, not a blade of grass was stirring. It was almost overpoweringly close and sultry. Peter had set both door and window open in invitation to a non-existent breeze to enter.

From the north, where a great bank of ominous black clouds was piled, came a low, sinister rumble.

"It's coming," said Peter aloud, looking through the window. "The storm, the tempest, the whole

wrath of the furious elements will shortly be loosed upon us. The clouds are coming up with extraordinary rapidity, considering there's no wind at all down here. Up there it must be blowing half a gale. We'll get rain soon."

He returned to his darning.

"Her gesture, motion, and her smiles,
Her wit, her voice, my heart beguiles,
Beguiles my heart, I know not why,
And yet I love her till I die,"

he sang, sticking his needle carefully in and out of the heel of the sock.

"And the green of the wool doesn't match the green of the sock one little bit!" he said ruefully. "But, after all, no one looks at me; and I certainly can't look at my own heels—at least, not without a certain amount of effort, so *n'importe*, as they say in France."

"Cupid is wingèd and doth range
Her country, so my love doth change;
But change she earth, or change she sky,
Yet will I love her till I die."

Peter cut the wool with his pocket-knife, and

contemplated the sock with his head on one side. Then he threw it on to the table. There was a little laugh in his eyes, not caused by the contemplation of the sock.

"I believe," he said whimsically, "that that fellow—what was his name?—Neil Macdonald, was right after all, and that Chaucer is—well, an old fraud. Yet," and a wistful look crept into his blue eyes, "I might have done much better if I'd gone on believing in him. Yet, I don't know. After all, Peter, my son, isn't the joy worth a bit of heartache!"

He got up from his chair and went towards the door. He could look over the hedge and up and down the lane from his position. A couple of big drops, large as half-crowns, had just fallen on his spotlessly white doorstep—Peter was proud of his doorstep. They were followed by another and another. There was a flash, a terrific peal, and then with a sudden hiss came the deluge. Straight down it fell, as if poured from buckets, and the lightning played across the sky and the thunder pealed.

"Ouf!" said Peter, drawing in a huge breath as the refreshing scent of the grateful earth came

to his nostrils. "That's really quite the very best smell there is, and worth all your eau-de-colognes, and your phulnanas, and—and your whatever you call 'em put together. It really is—" And then he broke off, for down the lane came running a woman, her head bent, the rain beating, drenching down upon her. Peter was at the gate in a moment.

"Come in here!" he called.

She paused, hesitated. Peter saw her face. His heart jumped, and then started off klip-klopping at a terrible rate.

"I—" she began. A blinding flash of lightning, followed by a terrific peal right overhead, stopped the words.

"Come at once!" said Peter imperatively, sharply almost. "It's not safe."

She ran up the path, he following. In the shelter of the cottage she turned and faced him. The colour in her face was not, perhaps, quite to be accounted for by the rain and her own haste.

"You're drenched," said Peter abruptly. "You can't stay in those wet things a moment longer than absolutely necessary. With your permission,

I shall go to your house and order your carriage to be sent immediately. But first—" He had put her a chair by the fireplace; he was on his knees applying a match to the pile of sticks and fir-cones already laid therein.

"But," protested Lady Anne, "I cannot give my permission. You will yourself be soaked—drenched—if you venture out in this downpour."

Peter laughed lightly. "It will not be the first time, nor, I dare to say, the last. Rain has but little effect on me." He rose from his knees. The flames were twining and twisting from stick to stick in long tongues of orange and yellow and blue. There was a merry crackling, there were flying sparks.

Peter crossed to the cupboard. From it he brought a black bottle and a wineglass.

"I have, alas! no brandy to offer you, but port wine will, I hope, prove as efficacious against a chill." Without paying the smallest heed to her protestations he poured her out a glass, which he held towards her. "Drink it," he said, in somewhat the tone one orders a refractory child to take a glass of medicine.

Anne took the glass, meekly, obediently, with

the faintest gurgle of laughter. "To your health!" she said as she sipped the wine.

Peter's heart beat hotly, madly. Here was She, actually She in the flesh, toasting him in his own room. He poured out another glass.

"To you," he said, and under his breath he added, "My Lady, my Star, my altogether Divinity!" Then he moved firmly to the door.

"I cannot allow you to go," said Anne quickly.

"Alas!" said Peter, smiling, "then I must forego your permission. In less than half an hour, in twenty minutes perhaps, your carriage will be here." And he vanished into the sluice without.

"And now," he said, as he set off at a half-canter down the lane, "if she does glance round the room and find it sleeping-apartment as well as sitting-room, she will, I trust, be less embarrassed. For Heaven knows whether in some particulars she may not bow to old Dame Grundy's decrees. Bless her!" And it is to be conjectured that it was not on Mrs. Grundy's head that Peter's blessing was invoked.

Anne, left to solitude, a blazing fire, and a glass of port, sat for a moment or so deep in thought.

Who was this man, with his little imperative ways, his abrupt speech, hiding, she was well aware, a certain embarrassment? He was well-born, there was no doubt about that fact. His voice, in spite of its abruptness, had the pleasant modulation of breeding. His hands—she had noticed his hands—were long-fingered, flexible, and brown. They were also well kept. Who was he? But *who* was he?

The fire offering her no solution, she finished her glass of port, and, kneeling down by the hearth, let the warmth of the flames play upon her wet blouse. She unpinned her hat and shook the rain from it. The drops sizzled as they fell among the flames and glowing sticks. She put her hat on the ground beside her and turned towards the room. She scrutinized it with interest. It was barely furnished but spotlessly clean. Against the farther wall she saw a truckle-bed covered with a blanket of cheerful red and blue stripes; she saw a cupboard on which were tea-things; a table; two chairs; and the chair on which she had been sitting. And that was all.

Then on the table she saw lying a pair of green socks; softly green they were, and somewhat

faded, and beside them was a card of green—virulently green—mending wool.

“O-oh!” said Anne, with a little shudder. But after a moment she rose from her knees in order to examine them closer. One sock had a patch of virulent green in the heel, a neat darn enough.

“Long practice,” said Anne, with a little shake of the head. In the other was a hole—quite a good-sized hole.

For a moment Anne hesitated, then, with a little smile, took up the card of excruciatingly green wool and broke off a strand. She threaded the needle she found stuck into the wool, and fitted the sock on her hand.

“I owe him,” said Anne, “some small payment for the shelter.” And she laughed, seating herself again in the armchair. Neatly, deftly, she drew the wool in and out across the hole, her ears alert to catch the sound of returning steps, or of carriage-wheels. The needle moved swiftly and with dexterity.

What is one to make of her? Lady Anne Garland—the proud, the much-courted, the to the world always aloof and sometimes disdainful

Lady Anne Garland—sitting in a meagrely furnished little room by a fire of sticks and fir-cones, darning the green sock of a vagabond Piper! And infinitely more incomprehensible is the fact that he—this man on whom she had only twice before set eyes—was causing her to think of him in a manner not at all good for the peace of her own soul; especially as—and here a distinct confession must be made—she was already quite more than half in love with a man she had never even seen—the writer of books and letters, Robin Adair.

Human nature is a complex and curious thing, though by those who, having read thus far, hold the key to the riddle her nature may perhaps be understood.

Ten minutes later and a neat darn had replaced the gaping hole. Finding no implement handy with which to cut the wool she broke it, then placed the sock, the wool, and the needle again upon the table in much the same position they had previously occupied.

She got up from her chair and crossed to the window. The rain was still coming down in torrents, and the lightning was still frequent, but the thunder was muttering now at a distance.

Once more she looked back into the room. What a queer little room it was, and how entirely peaceful! Why did the villagers imagine it to be haunted? Could anything be more restful, more reposeful? And how very homely it looked in spite of its somewhat bare appearance! And then she stopped in her reflections, for the sound of wheels had struck upon her ear. A moment later the carriage came in sight down the lane. On the box, mackintoshed and stately, were both coachman and footman.

Anne laughed. "It really was unnecessary for them both to come," she said to herself. And then Peter was out of the carriage and up the path to the door.

"It is here," he said.

Anne came forward. "I am more than grateful," she said. "And you must be terribly wet."

"Oh, I shall dry again," he said carelessly.

"It was very good of you," said Anne.

"It was a pleasure," said Peter, "to drive in a carriage."

"Oh!" said Anne demurely.

"And—" he continued, and stopped. But in his heart he added, "To do any mortal thing

for you, dear Lady!" But these speeches had a way of remaining in his heart without reaching his lips.

He unfurled an umbrella which he had purloined up at the house.

"The rain is not quite so furious now," he said as he opened it.

"Oh, my hat!" said Anne. She was at the hearth and back beside him in an instant. But in the transit she had glanced for a moment at the green socks on the table.

Peter, holding the umbrella carefully over her, conducted her down the path. The footman was standing by the carriage door. Anne held out her hand.

"A thousand thanks!" she said.

Peter gripped her hand hard. "I was delighted to be of the smallest service," he assured her.

The footman shut the door; Peter handed him the umbrella and he mounted with it to the box. The carriage, which had already turned, drove up in the direction of the white house on the hill.

Peter stood looking after it till it was out of sight, then went back into the cottage. He divested himself of his extremely wet coat and hung

it on the back of a chair by the fire. Not the armchair; that he gazed at almost reverently, for had not She sat in it! Then he went to the table and took up the socks. Arrested suddenly by something he saw, he examined them both carefully.

"I am sure," said Peter aloud, "that I only mended one sock, and now both—" He looked at a darn carefully. "Oh, oh!" said Peter, a light of illumination in his eyes. It was, however, almost incredible; he could hardly believe his senses. He lifted the sock nearer his face. A faint hint of lavender came to him. "Oh!" said he again; "the darling, the adorable darling!"

Peter crossed to his cupboard; he placed the sock carefully inside a sheet of clean manuscript paper and put it on a shelf.

Then he sat down in the armchair by the fire, filled and lit his pipe, and fell into an abstracted reverie, which lasted fully half an hour.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE EVERLASTING WHY

AND here it is necessary to introduce another character to the reader, one of whom there has already been a momentary glimpse, but who now comes forward to play his speaking part. He is indeed a small character, a young character, and might, at first appearance, seem insignificant, yet the part he has to play in Peter's drama is fraught with much consequence. A very small pebble dropped into a pool can send out wide circles, so this small figure dropped into Peter's life was to play a far-reaching and important part.

The little figure first made its appearance by peeping through the hedge in front of Peter's cottage. It was a boy-child, aged perhaps some seven summers, and was clad in short blue serge knickerbockers and a blue jersey.

Peter himself was sitting by the door piping. The small figure thought his presence unobserved,

but Peter's blue eyes were watching him keenly. He sat very still as he piped, and the music was calling the child to him.

It was a friendly, seductive little tune that he was playing, and Peter saw the child move towards the gate. He did not look at him now, fearing by the slightest sign or movement to startle him. Suddenly Peter felt a light touch on his knee, gentle as the touch of a small bird's wing. The child had stolen up the path and was beside him.

Peter's heart leapt with pleasure. It was as if he had drawn a little wild woodland creature near him. He still did not move, but he let the music die away.

"I like that," said the small boy, gazing at him with solemn eyes, "and I like you."

Peter's eyes wrinkled at the corners in sheer delight. It was a good many years since a child's voice had spoken to him, since a child's hand had been laid upon his knee.

"Oh," said Peter, smiling with pretended laziness, "do you? Well, I fancy the appreciation is reciprocated. What's your name?"

"Dickie Gordon," responded the small boy.

"I'm staying with my aunt and Lady Anne at the White House. I like Lady Anne."

Peter laughed. "Your judgment and intuition are faultless, my son. The Lady Anne is the divinest woman the good Lord ever created."

"Then you like her too?" queried Dickie.

"I might go farther than that," said Peter reflectively; "adoration, worship, might be nearer my sentiments. But how, may I ask, did you find your way down here?"

Dickie smiled, an elfin smile of pure wickedness.

"I ran away from nurse. She's got the baby in the perambulator. It's a very young baby, and perambulators are dull things—they can't get over stiles, or go across fields or even the tiniest kind of streams, not even streams with a plank across: the wheels are always too wide. And nurse doesn't understand anything, not why fields are nicer than roads, and why it's pleasant to stand still in a wood and listen, and why some walks are nice ways and some walks dull and horrid. She thinks everything's just all the same. And I can't explain things to her, things I know in my inside. So I just ran away and came to see you."

"You did, did you?" responded Peter. And back his mind swung to the memory of another small boy, one of whom the Lady Anne had written to him, and of another non-understanding grown-up. Oh, those Olympians who, from their heights of common sense, cannot stoop to the level of childhood!—for stooping they assuredly would term it, though Peter took another view of the respective levels. Yet, whatever the levels, the fact undoubtedly remained the same: their utter and entire incapacity of seeing eye to eye, of hearing ear to ear, of feeling heart to heart with a child. And, mused Peter, it was unquestionable whose was the greater loss. And then he roused himself.

"But how about my duty?" he demanded. "Oughtn't I to bind you, fetter you, and carry you back a prisoner to that perambulator, that very young baby, and that non-comprehending nurse?"

Dickie looked at him.

"You won't," he said comfortably; "besides, I want to talk."

"Humph!" said Peter, again smiling lazily; "well, talk. I shall doubtless make a good audi-

ence, since the hearing of speech is now something of a novelty to me."

Dickie looked at him again. The speech was not entirely clear, but the encouragement to talk was.

With a deep breath he began: "Nurse says this cottage is a bad place, and you're friends with the Devil. Is he really an unpleasant person? You don't look's if you'd be friends with him if he were."

"Hmm," said Peter, dubious, his eyes nevertheless twinkling; "I cannot say that I have honestly a very close acquaintanceship with him—at least, I hope not. But I have never fancied him a pleasant person. He has"—Peter sought wildly in his mind for the best reason for the averred unpleasantness—"so little idea of playing the game."

"Yes?" It was Dickie's turn to be dubious now.

"Oh," thought Peter distractedly, "I have not only to make statements, but I have to substantiate them!" Aloud he spoke, firmly, and with an air of conviction: "He does not play the game, because he pretends to be friendly when he isn't,

and he tells us things are nice when they aren't." This, at all events, was good and orthodox teaching. Peter patted himself on the back, so to speak.

"Like the apple what Adam and Eve ate," said Dickie solemnly; "they thought it was going to taste so nice, and make them very wise, but it was a sour apple, and they had to go away out of the garden 'cause they ate it."

"Exactly!" said Peter, much relieved that Dickie should be taking the initiative as chronicler of biblical events, feeling, be it stated, somewhat hazy on these subjects himself.

There was a pause. Then, with a deep sigh, Dickie spoke again.

"I wish I knew things."

"What things?" asked Peter, amused.

"Lots of things," said Dickie. There was a world of unconscious yearning in the child's voice. "I want to know lots of things. What made God think the world? Did He think me from the beginning, 'cause He knew everything? Why did He wait till now to make me? I'd so lots sooner have been a Viking. Why doesn't He let us choose what we are to be? Why are some days nice and other days horrid, though everything

looks just 'xactly the same and just as sunny? Why don't I know the whys of things?"

"Oh!" said Peter with a long-drawn breath, and a silence fell, while suddenly, and perhaps for almost the first time in his life, Peter faced the great eternal Question—the Everlasting Why of the Universe. And because he had no answer to give, because he had not as yet the faintest inkling of the answer, he was silent, though, all unconsciously, the child had put before him the problem his soul was inarticulately striving to solve.

"Why?" said Dickie again, gazing at him. And then Peter replied.

"You had better ask Lady Anne," he responded, basely shifting the responsibility. Yet though he half acknowledged the baseness, he knew confidently that she must be better able to deal with the question than he, for surely she, enshrined where she was in his thoughts, would have some knowledge, some answer to give, something to which he might listen with as great confidence as the child beside him would listen.

And then suddenly down the lane came a shrill voice, causing Dickie to start and Peter to look up quickly.

"Master Dickie, Master *Dickie!*" The tones were unquestionably somewhat strident.

"That's nurse," whispered Dickie.

"So I concluded," said Peter dryly. "What's to be done?"

"S'pose I must go," announced Dickie ruefully.

"Master *Dickie!*" The voice was close now, and the next moment a heated woman in nurse's garb and wheeling a perambulator came into view.

Peter got up and went down to the gate, holding Dickie's small brown hand close in his big one.

"I believe," said Peter courteously, "that you are looking for Master Dickie; here he is."

The woman paused, flabbergasted. "With you!" she ejaculated.

"With me," said Peter, smiling. "And after all he has heard about me," he continued seriously, "it's a wonder that he ventured near this cottage."

The nurse looked at Peter. There was something in his manner that checked the outburst of indignation that was perilously near the surface.

"I've been that worried!" she said, and she stopped to wipe her face with a large white handkerchief.

Peter appreciated her concern. It is unques-

tionably trying to lose a small boy entrusted to your care, especially on an exceedingly warm summer day, and have no notion what has become of him. Peter felt a bit of a culprit.

"I'm very sorry you've been bothered," he said contritely. "He—" and Peter paused; he could not give Dickie away.

"I came to see him," announced Dickie calmly, "because I wanted to find out what he was like. Now if you want me I'll come home. Good-bye, Mr. Piper." He held out his hand, which Peter shook gravely.

"You're a bad boy," said the nurse, virtuous indignation in her voice.

Dickie scorned a reply.

"He really hasn't come to any harm," said Peter apologetically.

"That's as may be," said the nurse with majestic significance, divided between her previous conception of Peter and the now very obvious fact that he was of gentle birth; "that's as may be. But his aunt won't care to hear of his goings-on, nor my Lady either, for that matter."

"Lady Anne will understand," protested Dickie, voicing Peter's own opinion.

"She may and she mayn't," was the tart reply. "Now you'll please to come home; we're half an hour late as it is."

"I said I was ready before," remarked Dickie calmly.

The nurse jerked the perambulator round in a manner that caused the very young baby within to open its eyes in a kind of mild protest.

"I'll come and see you again," said Dickie confidently to Peter.

The nurse pulled him by the arm. "You'll do nothing of the kind, Master Dickie."

"Huh!" said Dickie, "you don't know. I shall ask Lady Anne."

And then the three disappeared down the lane.

"The Lady Anne," remarked Peter to himself, "is evidently a divinity to another and much smaller person than I. I don't exactly love that nurse," he continued reflectively, "but I fancy she has her hands full."

And whistling airily, Peter passed up the little path to the cottage.

CHAPTER XIX

PIPER AND AUTHOR

UP at the White House Lady Anne Garland was entertaining Millicent Sheldon. The entertainment to Lady Anne proved somewhat weighty. The carefully mended Millicent was a different person from the one she had previously known. Her whole aspect was altered in Anne's eyes. She no longer saw her, as Millicent no doubt saw herself, a calm gracious Madonna, stretching out healing hands to a weary humanity. To Anne she was simply a very ordinary woman who had failed the man she had once loved—or professed to love—in his need.

And Anne suddenly realized that for all Millicent's grand and noble statements she had no use for failures. Let a man have his foot firmly planted on the ladder of success, albeit on the lowest rung, Millicent spoke of him with gracious condescension, held out the hand of friendship to

him. Those who had fallen from the ladder, or who were struggling towards it with little chance of reaching it, were not in her eyes worth a moment's consideration. Truly the cracks were horribly, terribly conspicuous, and Anne had much ado to prevent Millicent from recognizing that she perceived them. She looked forward to the day of Millicent's departure with a guilty hopefulness, a secret longing which she felt was almost indecent in a hostess. And then something happened to delay that day.

Dickie, the solemn-eyed Dickie, fell ill. It was one of those sudden swift illnesses of childhood that grip the hearts of parents with a terrible fear, and Anne and Millicent, who loved the small boy as if he were their own, watched the little fever-stricken body with grave anxiety, and dreaded to think what news the next mail to India might not carry.

The villagers came daily to inquire. Voices were hushed when the child's name was mentioned. Peter alone, to whom no one ever spoke, did not know of the illness. He only wondered why Dickie, who had escaped his vigilant nurse more than once, did not come to the cottage.

And then one day, when the fever was running high, Dickie began a plaint, a piteous little moaning for the Piper. Backwards and forwards on the pillow tossed the small fevered head; the dry lips called ceaselessly to the Piper to come and pipe to him. In some vague way Dickie had confounded him with the Pied Piper of Hamelin, and wanted Peter to take him through the mountain and show him sparrows brighter than peacocks and horses with eagles' wings. Peter had told Dickie many a tale of fancy during his visit to the cottage.

"Who is it he wants?" asked the doctor sharply, watching the child. "Can no one fetch him?"

Anne, who was near the bed, stood up.

"I know," she said. "I will write a note and send——"

The doctor, a little man with a crusty manner and a heart as tender as a woman's, interrupted her testily.

"Can't you go yourself?" he snapped. "I know what servants are when they're sent on messages. The child is—I'm anxious, and as cross as an old bear," he concluded.

Anne was already at the door.

"I'll not be long," she said. "Miss Haldane will be here if you need her. I'll send her to you. Nurse is with the baby and Mrs. Sheldon is lying down. She was up most of last night."

A few moments later Anne was walking down the drive. It was a grey afternoon, lapped in soft clouds, and with a little sad wind in the trees suggestive of autumn, though it was only August.

Anne felt a sensation of depression, a faint foreboding as of impending ill. She told herself that it was merely fatigue. Dickie would get well—she knew he would get well. And yet she did not really think that anxiety regarding Dickie was causing this depression. It was something more remote, something intangible and vague.

She determined not to think about it—to throw aside the slight uneasiness. Yet again and again it crept over her in insidious little waves, despite all her efforts to the contrary.

Peter was busy writing when the knock came on his door. Now, whether it was telepathy or clairvoyance is not known, but his heart jumped at the knock, and he got up quickly, opening wide the door.

"What is wrong?" he queried anxiously as he saw Anne's face. He almost forgot to be surprised at her presence there.

"It's Dickie," said Anne. "He's ill, very ill. The child has got some queer ideas into his head. He has mixed you up in an odd way with the Pied Piper of Hamelin. He has been talking about you a great deal—half in delirium, you understand. He wants you to pipe to him." She stopped.

"Oh!" ejaculated Peter, his voice full of sympathy. "The pathetic little mite! I'll come at once." And then he, too, stopped, hesitated. "If you will go on," he said, "I'll follow you."

"Can't you," asked Anne, "come back with me now at once? I fancy—I may be wrong—that the doctor thinks every minute is of importance."

Peter flushed. "Of course," he said, "I'll come now. It was only—" Again he stopped, and Anne waited, wondering.

"Only," said Peter desperately, "that I thought perhaps you would rather not walk with me. I—the villagers, you know, look upon me with disfavour."

Anne raised her chin. There was a little regal

air in the gesture. "But really," she assured him, "I am not accustomed to consider the opinion of the villagers."

"Oh, you idiot," groaned Peter inwardly, "you idiot, you double-dyed dolt! Now you've offended her, though I protest your intentions were good." Aloud he said meekly, "I'll come with you at once."

He turned and picked up his hat from a chair. As the long peacock feather caught his eye, again he groaned inwardly. He was for flinging the hat aside, but Lady Anne was watching him. He put it on his head desperately, and came out on to the path beside her, feeling for all the world a mountebank, a popinjay, a fool. Why, oh why! had he maliciously defied the Fates? Why, oh why! had this peacock feather lain in his path once long ago? And still further, why had he been idiot enough to pick it up and wear it merely in a spirit of contradiction, because once upon a time a woman had announced her belief in a superstition regarding peacock feathers.

He attempted to appear unconcerned, at his ease, but he was aware that the attempt was a poor one. Nor did the amazed glances of the

villagers, as they crossed the green, tend to reassure him. Yet here was Lady Anne walking calmly, quietly, entirely at her ease, entirely dignified. Why was he ass enough to care for the glances of these yokels! Yet he knew it was not for himself that he cared, but for his Lady, his divinity, who had deigned herself to visit his cottage, to ask him with her own lips to perform a service for her. He longed for a flow of words to come to him, yet none but the most banal remark presented itself to his mind, therefore he walked beside her in silence.

At the entrance to the drive Peter suddenly shivered, why, he did not know, for the day, though grey, was hot. It was as if some slight indefinable feeling of apprehension had struck him.

Anne glanced at him. "Cold?" she queried, smiling.

"No," responded Peter, smiling in response. "I fancy it was—according to the old adage—a goose walking over my grave."

"Oh!" said Anne. And the slight feeling of uneasiness, which had temporarily departed, returned.

"Which, so say the superstitious folk," con-

tinued Peter lightly, "denotes misfortune to the owner of the grave. Personally—" He broke off with a slight shrug of the shoulders.

"You are not a believer in omens and superstitions," suggested Anne in conclusion. "So I might suppose. Your—your hat decoration is generally regarded as provocative of ill-luck," she smiled.

Peter flushed. "It's a fool thing to wear," he said lamely, "but——"

"On the contrary," said Anne demurely, "it fits in with your rôle. I believe it was the rumour of the peacock feather that first gave me the courage to ask you to play to me. It sounded fantastic, unusual. I dared to think that you might respond to an unusual invitation. The feather, I repeat, gave me courage."

"Then," said Peter gallantly, "I wear it with a good will as an omen of fortune's favours. You did not, however, ask me a second time."

Anne drew a quick breath. "No," she responded. "Yet—you came."

"Yes," said Peter quietly, "I came."

Anne might have spoken again, but they were at the door by now, and they passed

into the hall together and up the wide shallow stairs.

The sick-room was in half light, for the curtains were partly drawn. The doctor was sitting by the bed, his eyes watching, grave. Miss Haldane was at a little distance. They both looked up as the two entered.

Anne crossed to the bedside, Peter following.

"Dickie," said Anne, softly and distinctly, "I have brought the Piper to you." She sat down and took one of the small hot hands in hers.

Peter came to the foot of the bed. He drew his pipe from his pocket. As the first sweet notes of the pipe filled the room Dickie lay still. It was the friendly, seductive little tune Peter had first played to the child. No one stirred and the magic piping breathed through the air.

"More," said Dickie, as Peter stopped. And the request was quiet, conscious.

Peter came a little nearer. "This, Dickie, is the sleepy song the Pied Piper played the children when he carried them away to the Wonderful Land. So shut your eyes and listen, and you will sleep and dream of running streams, and flowers,

and of cool green grass, and beautiful birds, and horses with eagles' wings, that will carry you away gently on their backs to the place where children get well." Peter's voice dropped to a murmur.

And then once more came the music, a low crooning lullaby, full of adorable restful tenderness. Dickie's eyes closed drowsily. The music crooned on, rocking softly, soothingly. Then Dickie gave a little gentle sigh, his fingers relaxed their hold on Anne's, his small hand fell open on the counterpane, and Dickie slept.

"Thank God!" breathed the old doctor. And he took off his spectacles and wiped them.

Peter looked at Anne. She nodded, and rose from her chair. They stole softly from the room together. They passed down the corridor. Then Anne turned and spoke.

"I can't say anything but 'Thank you.' " She smiled, a little wavering smile, and her eyes were misty.

"Oh," said Peter with a huge sigh, "I'm glad. He's—he's such a jolly little chap."

And then he looked up, for a woman was coming towards them.

"It is Mrs. Sheldon, Dickie's aunt," said Anne,

explanatory. "She—" And she broke off, amazed at the sudden rigidity of Peter's face.

"Oh!" said Millicent as she saw the two. And she stopped dead.

"What is it?" queried Anne, astonished. "Do you two know each other?"

"I once had the pleasure of Mr. Carden's acquaintance," said Millicent stiffly, "but now——"

"Mr. Carden!" ejaculated Anne. And a light dawned upon her, a light of painful significance.

"I was not aware he was in the house," said Millicent coldly. "I was not aware that you knew him."

Then Peter spoke. "As Peter Carden Lady Anne does not know me," he said steadily, though his face was white. "She knows me only as Peter the vagabond Piper."

"An alias," said Millicent scornfully. "One, no doubt, of several."

Anne was waiting, silent. Peter had a sudden thought that she was waiting for him to speak, to deny the accusation if he could. He felt utterly and entirely weary.

"Oh no!" he said bitterly; "only one other—Robin Adair."

"Oh!" said Anne, shrinking as if the name had been a blow.

"It really does not signify what you choose to call yourself," said Millicent. "But I do not care that my friends should be deceived."

Peter drew in his breath sharply. He looked straight at her, and in her eyes he could read the true cause for her anger. "You are right," he said quietly. "And I have deceived her." He turned to Anne. Her head was erect, her face white, motionless. Indignation, anger, contempt, he saw all three in her eyes.

He turned without a word and passed down the stairs, across the hall, and through the hall door, which he closed softly behind him as he went.

CHAPTER XX

FAREWELL

THE night was far spent. For hours Peter had sat by his table with writing materials before him, and at length his letter was written, ended.

“It is the last time I shall write to you, but I ask you to condone my conduct—at least, sufficiently to read what I have written. I know I have no excuse to make. To say that my deception arose from the knowledge that if you once knew Peter the Piper and Robin Adair as one and the same I should lose your letters is of course none. I deceived you deliberately, and broke the compact that our identities should remain unknown to each other. Though I did not first break it, nor was it broken of my will. Being broken by fate, however, I should have told you.

“And by now you will have realized that you extended the hand of friendship to one who had

entirely forfeited the right to it. Is it, perhaps, any compensation to you to know that your letters, your kindness, have at least been received with humble gratitude, with the most intense and overwhelming pleasure by one however unworthy to receive them?

“I shall leave this cottage at daylight. My presence here longer would, I know, be distasteful to you. I have no right to ask your forgiveness, yet if one day you could extend it to me, and think less hardly of me, I should be glad. The one thing I can do, and believe you would wish me to do, is to destroy your letters. I cannot destroy the memory of them—that is impossible, and I dare to hope that in your generosity you will not grudge it to me.

“Presently I shall try to write again, and if ever fate should throw my work in your path, and you deign to read it, then know that whatever in it is of worth, whatever is in the smallest degree of good, has been inspired by the thought of you.

“For all your blessed kindness, for the fact that you are you and are in the world, I shall throughout my life be grateful.

"Perhaps one day I may get the chance to atone.

"PETER CARDEN."

The letter written, Peter got up from his chair and crossed to the fireplace. In a few moments a flame sprang up, and some bluish papers twisted and shrivelled in its heat. Presently nothing was left but a small heap of grey ashes.

Peter sat very still. There was a lump in his throat, and he swallowed hard once or twice, but his eyes were dry. A bird chirped in the bushes outside the cottage; it was answered by another and another. The air became full of a chorus of twitterings and chirpings.

Peter roused himself. He picked up his hat and a bundle from the table and went to the cottage door. In the east the sky was flushing to rose and lavender. Peter went down the path. He opened the little gate. A moment later it had swung to behind him, and he was walking down the dusty road.

CHAPTER XXI

A WOUNDED SKYLARK

MISS HALDANE was worried, perturbed. Her usually cheerful old face was wrinkled into lines of perplexity, her eyes were anxious.

Something was wrong at the White House. Dickie had slept peacefully throughout the night, and with the extraordinary recuperation of children, had demanded bread and milk on awaking. It was perfectly natural to suppose that an air of jubilation should prevail. Yet Lady Anne was pale, silent, aloof; Millicent Sheldon slightly cold and frigid. What in the name of wonder did it signify? Vaguely Miss Haldane connected the extraordinary atmosphere with the Piper. It was true that he had been accountable, under Providence, for Dickie's marvellous recovery, yet Miss Haldane distinctly regarded him as a bird of ill-omen, and in her heart bitterly regretted that necessity had called him to the house.

Throughout the day she fidgeted and fluttered interiorly, keeping sharp and anxious watch on Anne's pale and almost stern face, without, however, in the least appearing to do so. At tea-time she found herself alone in the drawing-room with Millicent, Anne being in Dickie's room.

Then Miss Haldane could contain her anxiety no longer. She disliked Millicent Sheldon, but it was a case of any port in a storm. Having poured out tea and handed Millicent a cup, she prefaced her first remark by a slight and nervous cough.

"Anne looks very pale," she said tentatively. "I hoped to see her looking better now our anxiety is practically at an end."

"Yes," said Millicent, taking a sip of tea.

This was unsatisfactory. Miss Haldane returned to the charge more openly.

"I hope," she said, "that nothing has worried her?"

Millicent put down her teacup. "It is distinctly unfortunate," she said, "that that man who called himself Peter the Piper should have come into this neighbourhood." She made the remark with a calm majesty of manner.

"Oh?" queried Miss Haldane, pricking up her ears and looking for all the world like a terrier on the scent of a rat; "do you know anything about him?"

"Only that he has spent three years in prison for forgery," said Millicent gravely. "Anne has got unaccountably familiar with him in some way, and is naturally vexed to find her friendship misplaced." She puckered her smooth white brow with an air of grave, gracious anxiety, but there was a hard expression in her eyes.

Miss Haldane ruffled like a small angry bird, the terrier expression forgotten.

"Lady Anne," she said with dignity, "is certainly not familiar with him. You must have been misinformed."

"Really!" Millicent lifted her eyebrows coolly. "From Anne's own showing yesterday, she knew considerably more about him than probably you or I had the smallest idea of. She has not seen fit to confide in me, but it was entirely apparent."

Miss Haldane sat very upright. "If Anne did know more of him than we imagine," she remarked firmly, "it shows that he was a more desirable person to know than I had supposed."

Millicent controlled her temper admirably. Of course, it was entirely absurd, but the old thing was, unquestionably, trying to snub her.

"A man who has been in prison!" she remarked, with an air of quiet finality and an exasperating little laugh.

Miss Haldane's usually dim old eyes blazed. "Under God we owe Dickie's recovery to him," she said with quiet dignity. "Might not that make us a little charitable towards him?"

And Millicent, for her outward imperturbability of manner, was annoyedly conscious that Miss Haldane had scored.

And then Anne walked in.

"Am I interrupting confidences?" she asked, with an attempt at her usual lightness of manner. "Dickie is a fraud; he is demanding bread and jam, or at least toast and honey. I consider he has basely deceived us all."

And then she saw that the atmosphere was really strained, tense. She pretended blindness, however, and, sitting down, asked for some tea. While drinking it she made a few airy remarks, to which Miss Haldane responded absent-mindedly, and Millicent with a pained and almost holy silence.

Then Millicent got up. "I am going to see Dickie," she said.

As the door closed behind her, Miss Haldane gave a sigh of relief.

"How I dislike that woman!" she said.

"I saw she had ruffled you," said Anne soothingly.

"She was impertinent," remarked Miss Haldane with dignity.

"Millicent! Impertinent!" Anne's eyes were big with amazement. "My dear Matty!" She might be many things, but impertinent seemed the last word to connect with the large statuesque Millicent.

"Impertinent," said Miss Haldane firmly. "It is only her size that makes it not usually apparent. If she were a small woman, it would be obvious to the meanest intelligence. And she is distinctly ungrateful. Whatever that man has done, whatever he is, we owe him a debt of gratitude."

"Oh!" said Anne, her eyes clouding; "she was talking about him?"

"Yes. My dear, have you considered that even if he did wrong in the past he may have repented? And he did help Dickie."

"Yes," said Anne slowly; "he helped Dickie."

"Even if," continued Miss Haldane earnestly, "he has once been in prison, he cannot be altogether bad at heart, or a child—" she stopped. To her own surprise, the contradictory old thing was defending the Piper.

"Oh, prison!" said Anne vaguely.

"Yes; didn't you know? Was not that why you were vexed—angry?"

Anne gave an odd little laugh. "No, Matty, dear. To be candid, it was not that at all. Somehow—it's queer, isn't it?—I never thought of that."

"Then why—?" began Miss Haldane, perplexed, vague.

"Oh, it's a complicated situation," said Anne dryly; "but—well, every atom of pride I ever possessed has been dragged in the mud, humbled, abased. Now you have the truth; and for Heaven's sake don't ask me any more!" Again the hard look crept into her face. She got up and moved to the window.

Miss Haldane watched her. Had there been any truth in Millicent's words? Had she seen more of this man than Miss Haldane had supposed?

Clandestine meetings, secret letters, fluttered rapidly before Miss Haldane's mind. Then she looked at Anne again. It was impossible. Whatever had happened, it was certain that it was nothing of which Anne need really be ashamed.

And Anne, silent at the window, had bitterness in her heart; she felt her pride, as she had said, humbled, dragged in the dust. This man to whom she had written had amused himself at her expense. As one person he had received her intimate letters, as another he had been the recipient of gracious favours on which he had doubtless put a totally wrong construction. Posing as two men, yet in reality one, he could compare the favours she had accorded both. The rose, the green sock—her face burnt at the thought of them. The one man, Robin Adair, smiling at her gracious letters, and smiling still more at her gracious treatment of the vagabond Piper.

It was monstrous, preposterous! How he must have laughed in his sleeve when she told him of her inclination to confound the two men. Anger and indignation were in Anne's heart at the thought, yet deeper still was an odd little ache,

and the fact that it existed, and she was conscious of it, curiously enough increased her indignation against Peter.

The door opened softly, and the footman entered with a letter on a tray. He crossed to the window where Anne was standing. As she saw the letter lying there, a hot flush mounted in her face. She took it, holding it irresolutely in her hand. When the door had closed again, she broke the seal.

There was a long silence. At last Miss Haldane looked round. Anne's face was quivering.

"What is it?" asked Miss Haldane, her voice full of perplexed anxiety.

"Only," said Anne, with a half sob, "that I have torn the little young wings from a skylark."

CHAPTER XXII

CANDLES AND MASSES

I

IF at the beginning of the last chapter Miss Haldane was perturbed, worried, perplexed, so, rather more than two months later, Muriel Lancing was perturbed, worried, perplexed, also; and for the same cause, namely, the strange demeanour of the Lady Anne Garland, who had returned to town at the beginning of November.

She was changed, she was totally different, so sighed Muriel, reflective, meditative. Where was her former charm? her former sweet kindliness? her faith, her trust, her buoyancy—in short, her everything that went to make up the Anne Muriel knew and loved? An obsession seemed to have come upon her. She was cynical, hard, the speaker of little bitter phrases, deliberately calculated to wound and hurt. She was not, as Muriel reflected,

Anne at all, but a mask, a shell of a woman, in which deep down the real Anne was imprisoned, buried.

"If only she would speak," sighed Muriel to herself. "If only the mask could be removed for a moment the real Anne would be liberated. Confession, so says dear old Father O'Sullivan, is good for the soul. It would be incalculably good for Anne's. But she won't make one. And short of asking her straight out to do so, which would inevitably fix the mask on tighter still, I can do nothing."

But, all the same, Muriel went off to the Oratory and set up a candle to St. Joseph, telling him pretty lucidly the whole state of affairs and requesting him to do something.

Now whether it was the intervention of St. Joseph, or whether it was that the real imprisoned Anne could bear her solitary confinement no longer, must be a matter for pure conjecture; but on the next occasion that Muriel visited Anne's house in Cheyne Walk she was distinctly conscious that though the mask was on there was a tiny crack in it, and through the crack the real Anne was looking with a kind of dumb pleading.

In a twinkling Muriel's finger was towards it, in, of course, the most insidious and hidden way imaginable. It is useless to attempt to describe her methods; they were purely feminine, entirely delicate. At length the shell, the mask, fell asunder, and the real Anne, being liberated, spoke. It was an enormous relief to her, and from the very beginning up to Millicent's disclosure she confided the whole story to Muriel, who watched her with her greeny-grey eyes full of sympathy.

"Oh, but," cried Muriel as she stopped, "I quite understand your anger. Of course, it's very difficult to put into exact words why you are angry, the whole situation is so extraordinarily complicated. But," she concluded, "any woman with the smallest modicum of sense must see why. And the fact that Millicent was the person there at the time can't have made things a bit nicer."

"It didn't," said Anne quietly. "But I haven't finished yet. He wrote to me."

"Yes?" queried Muriel.

"It—his letter swept away all my anger. I—I understood."

"Of course," Muriel nodded, "there is his point of view."

"I saw it," said Anne. "I realized—or thought I realized—the utter loneliness that made him act as he had done. I—I wrote to him."

"Yes?" queried Muriel again, and very gently.

"I said—oh, I said a good deal," confessed Anne. "And—and he has never replied. Oh, don't you see it's that that hurts? I said things I would never have said if I hadn't believed he was longing for me to say them, if I hadn't"—Anne's face was crimson—"wanted to say them. I was so sure I'd hear from him again. And—and there was only a cruel silence. I'd give anything never to have written that letter." Shamed, broken, she looked piteously at Muriel. Anne was proud, and she was young. She did not yet know that there is no shame in giving love, offering it purely, finely, as she had done. Is not God Himself daily making the offering, an offering from which too many of us turn away?

"But, darling Anne," cried Muriel, "perhaps—surely he could not have received it."

Anne shook her head. "It's what I'd like to believe," she said with a little bitter laugh, "what

we'd both like to believe. But it's no good. I sent it to his publishers, the same address as that to which I'd sent the others. Oh, no! that kind of letters don't miscarry. I have misunderstood all through."

"Darling!" said Muriel softly.

There was a long silence, broken only by an occasional little sputtering of the coal in the fire, and the rumble of wheels and clack of horses' hoofs without. And in the silence Muriel was giving very deep thanks to St. Joseph that Anne—her beloved Anne—was once more restored to her. Also she was cogitating in her own mind still further benefits to be asked of him.

Presently Anne broke the silence.

"Muriel, I'd rather you should forget—that we should never speak again—about what I've told you this afternoon."

Muriel took up an illustrated paper from a side table.

"Hats," she announced sententiously, "will be worn small this winter, and skirts mercifully not quite so tight. Have you noticed Mrs. Clinton? She's positively indecent. I blush scarlet if I'm with a man when I meet her."

Anne laughed, though there were tears in her eyes.

"Muriel," she said, "you're the silliest and dearest little elf in Christendom."

II

Muriel made more than one further journey to the Oratory to explain matters to St. Joseph, on each occasion presenting that delightful saint with a candle. The first time—subsequent to Anne's confession—that she went to the Oratory she gave him two, one being for thanksgiving.

Also she invited Father O'Sullivan to tea on an occasion when Tommy, by Muriel's suggestion, had taken Anne to skate at Prince's.

Father O'Sullivan was a short, stoutish man, with grizzled hair, small twinkling eyes, and a mouth that had the kindest twist of a smile imaginable. To know Father O'Sullivan for an hour was to love him. To know him for longer was to love him better. Muriel had known him from her babyhood.

This afternoon, having invited him to tea, she plied him with cakes and quince sandwiches, which latter his soul adored, and talked in a gay

and inconsequent fashion of airy nothings, to which Father O'Sullivan responded after the manner of Irishmen, be they priests or laymen.

But on the conclusion of the meal she dropped into a pensive mood, and sat with her elbow on the arm of her chair, and her pointed chin resting in her cupped hand, gazing into space with great dreamy eyes.

And then all at once she roused herself and looked across at Father O'Sullivan.

"Father," she said seriously, "I want you to say a Mass for me."

"You do, do you?" said Father O'Sullivan, stroking his chin. "And with what intention?"

"Well," said Muriel, reflective, "it's not quite easy to explain. I think I'd better tell you the story." And she launched forth, omitting names at the moment, though at a future date she happened inadvertently to mention Peter's.

"Well, now," said Father O'Sullivan as she ended, and his eyes were twinkling, "is it just a little small story like that you'd have me be repeating at Mass, for I'm thinking it will take just no time at all."

"Oh, don't laugh at me!" begged Muriel.

"Don't you see how difficult it is to put into words what I want!" She dropped her hands in her lap and gazed at him tragically.

"Well, but have a try," urged Father O'Sullivan. "Perhaps I can be helping you out."

"First, then," said Muriel, "I want her to be happy again, and I don't see how that can be unless she hears from him, and even that alone would be no good, because I'm sure to be really happy she'd have to marry him, and you see he has committed forgery. If only that could be untrue—but it's impossible, and I don't see how anything can come right," she ended despairingly.

Father O'Sullivan rubbed his hair up the wrong way. "And it's a Mass with the intention of things coming right you want me to say, when all the time you're feeling sure they can't," he remarked severely. "And if I'm going to say it that way myself, what kind of faith do you think I'm going to have in it?"

Muriel looked at him contritely. "But don't you see—" she began.

"Oh, I see fast enough," he responded. "Let's get at what you want the other way round. To begin with, you want the young man never to

have committed the forgery, and then you want to run through the whole gamut till they live happily ever after. And all the time you're wishing it, and wanting me to pray for it, you're telling yourself it can't be. Isn't that so?" His twinkling old eyes belied the half-severity of his words.

"Oh, but," said Muriel, "it's—it's such a lot to ask."

Father O'Sullivan leaned forward and tapped the forefinger of his right hand in the palm of his left.

"Faith, my child, is not asking God for bushels and setting out a pint measure to catch them in. It's a good old saying, but not my own, more's the pity of it. Now, do you want me to say this Mass for you with the intention we've arranged?"

"Yes," said Muriel firmly.

"And you'll come to it, and believe that it will be answered, whether in your way or God's you leave to Him?" he asked gravely.

"Yes," said Muriel again.

Father O'Sullivan nodded his head approvingly. "To-morrow morning at eight o'clock I'll be

saying it then," he said, "and you'll be praying too." He leaned back in his chair.

"Of course," ventured Muriel, "it's rather a complicated thing to put into words."

Father O'Sullivan smiled, a merry, twinkling humorous old smile. "Faith, I'll be getting it into some kind of shape," he promised. "And if we could hear all the prayers sent up to heaven I'm thinking we'd find many a muddled phrase down here straightened out by the holy saints as they carry them up to God's Throne. And no matter what the muddles are, the answer's clear enough when it comes."

And then the door opened and Anne, Tommy, and General Carden walked in.

Muriel gave a little gasp. "I thought you were having tea at Prince's," she said.

And Father O'Sullivan, as he watched her face with wicked pleasure, realized—and it did not take a vast amount of sagacity to do so—that one at least of the three was concerned with the story she had just confided to his ears. And as it obviously was not Tommy, and he concluded he might rule out the white-haired military-looking man, it left only the tall, graceful woman who

crossed to a chair by Muriel and began pulling off her gloves.

"We got bored," said Tommy; "at least Anne did, and we decided to come home to tea. And we met General Carden on the doorstep, and here we all are. And if you're too flustered for some reason to introduce everybody nicely, I will."

"Don't be silly, Tommy," said Muriel, laughing and recovering her equanimity. "Ring the bell, and we'll have fresh tea made."

"No need," said Tommy. "I saw Morris in the hall and told him." And he sat down by Father O'Sullivan. General Carden took a chair near Anne.

"I was sorry not to find you at home when I called last Thursday," he said. "Your servant told me you were at home on Tuesdays."

"Yes," said Anne. She hesitated, half doubtful. Then she added: "But perhaps you'll come another afternoon? At-home days are not very satisfactory. Shall we say Wednesday?"

"I shall be delighted," returned General Carden. "We had, if I remember rightly, a long argument the last time we met, about a book. Let me see,

what was the author's name?" He wrinkled his brows, reflective, thoughtful.

Anne turned to put her gloves on the table beside her. "Robin Adair, wasn't it?" she asked quietly.

"Ah, yes, of course!" replied the old hypocrite.

Muriel glanced at Anne. "I wish," she reflected with admiration, "that I could act as well. I nearly gave myself away just now, when they all descended on me like an avalanche. And I'd bet my bottom dollar Father O'Sullivan guessed something." Which bet, if there had been any one to take her on, Muriel would certainly have won.

Anne, as she drove towards Chelsea half an hour later, wondered vaguely why she had asked General Carden to tea with her. Finally she decided that it was for the obvious reason that he wanted to come, and she would have been rude if she had not done so.

And Father O'Sullivan, as he walked home, ruminated on the tangled story Muriel had told him. It was only one of the many tangles in the world, and he knew it, but it had been brought

directly to his notice, and he had a very simple and perfect faith that the good God would unravel the knots in His own way and at His own time.

CHAPTER XXIII

DUM SPIRO, SPERO

YOU know how there are times in our lives when the days hang heavily, each moment dragging on leaden feet, weighted all the more grievously because we are ready to protest to our fellowmen, to ourselves perhaps, that the days are not grey, but each one as full of light as we would have it be. And if you do not know you are lucky. Or are you lucky? Are not the heavy clouds, which temporarily hide the golden sunshine, better than a dull monochrome of a life, in which neither cloud nor sunshine is existent? For is it not by the very brightness of the sun which has been, that we recognize the clouds which now obscure it? It is when the sun has never shone in its fullest splendour for us that we do not recognize the existence of the clouds, for to say that any life is passed in one unbroken dream of golden glory is to make a statement which one will dare to denounce as untrue. If there be the gold of joy, so there

will come the clouds of sorrow, and a life without clouds is of necessity one without sun, a monochrome of a life, peaceful perhaps, but lacking in intensity.

The days passed slowly for Anne. They no longer went by with the gay carelessness of a year, six months, nay, only three months ago. Take an interest out of your life, however chary you may have been of admitting the existence of that interest to your secret heart, and then fill your days with gaiety, friends, books, anything and everything but the one thing you want, and you will find it a method of subtraction and addition which is apt to result in a distinctly unsatisfactory sum total.

It is not to be supposed, however, that Anne wore her heart upon her sleeve for society daws to peck at. She hid it and its little ache deep under a charming courtliness which was, if anything, more charming than usual. And if she smiled a little more frequently, if a *bon mot* came more readily to her lips, after all they were but attempts to bury the heartache a bit deeper, and it was at least the real Anne who once more walked the earth.

She saw Millicent occasionally, but only occasionally. There was now between them a civil exchange of courtesies; an assumption, but merely an assumption, of the old friendly footing. On a certain afternoon in the White House Millicent had attempted to give a version of a particular story to Anne. To which Anne had responded that she already knew it. Millicent, however, had attempted to explain, and in explaining had told Anne one or two things Anne had not before known, which things had caused those aforementioned cracks in Millicent to gape with such ominous wideness that Millicent herself suddenly perceived them, and, worse still, saw that Anne perceived them. Anne had quietly announced that she preferred not to talk of the matter further: the part of it that concerned Millicent was her own affair, the part of it that concerned herself was hers. And so it had concluded, outwardly at all events. But it did not require a vast amount of acumen to perceive that their former friendly relationship was of necessity a trifle strained.

It is not to be inferred from this, however, that Anne and Millicent were anywhere near warfare with each other. Anne was far too much *grande*

dame for such a proceeding. Also her sentiments towards Millicent were now those of pure indifference. Millicent had never counted a great deal in her life, she now merely counted less. Of Millicent one cannot be so sure. She had seen Anne's face on that historic afternoon; she had seen Peter's face. She had therefrom drawn her own conclusions—conclusions to which Anne's subsequent refusal to discuss the matter had given further weight.

Millicent would have liked to think of Peter as pining in quiet grief for her, leading a kind of *piano* life of minor passages in which she stood for the keynote. She had—to be candid—pictured Peter in her mind as a prematurely grey-haired man, slightly bowed at the shoulders (from remorse), gazing fervently at a photograph of a Madonna-like woman with a child in her arms (Millicent's latest by Lafayette), sorrowfully considering the fact that the child was not his, and announcing to Heaven that the thought of her should guide him at last to its Gates. It must be allowed that it was a distinct jar to find him not at all grey-haired, not at all bowed at the shoulders, but jaunty, debonair, carrying a ridi-

culous hat with a peacock feather in his hand, and talking intimately to one of her own friends, one, too, who had kept her acquaintanceship with him a dead secret. Millicent's feelings towards both him and Anne verged on something like hatred, though this primeval instinct was so hidden beneath a mask of culture that no one, Anne least of all, perceived it.

Of General Carden Anne now saw a good deal. Having come once to her house he came again, and came frequently. And every time, by some subtle method of his own device, he contrived to mention a certain green-covered book, and also to speak of the author. And, queerly enough, Anne responded. Perhaps by some feminine intuition she guessed General Carden's secret, namely, that he had a pretty shrewd inkling of the identity of the author, and perhaps underneath the courtly worldly demeanour of the old man she saw the heart which longed for some word, some sign, from him. And perhaps knowing this, seeing this, the heart of the now liberated Anne went out to the old General, having in a way a common cause of unhappiness. And so the two smiled and chatted, and skimmed the surface of

their sorrow, finding in so doing a curious consolation, so queer and unaccountable is human nature.

And then one day, a few weeks after her conversation with Muriel, she became conscious of a tiny hope in her heart. She could no more say at which precise moment it had first been born than one can say at which precise moment the tiny green leaves of a spring flower first push above the brown earth. For weeks there is nothing to be seen, and then one morning we come down to our garden and the tiny shoot is there in the sunshine, smiling shyly at us.

And so one morning, all unsuspected in its hidden growth, a tiny green shoot of hope sprang up in Anne's heart, a hope that after all her pride had not been abased as she had feared, but that somewhere, somehow, love was lifting it from the earth. It is not easy to put into exact words precisely what she hoped, but assuredly trust had been renewed. And with an old priest praying at an altar, and a woman kneeling to St. Joseph, and somewhere, far away, a man's heart worshipping and adoring, it is hardly surprising that it was so.

CHAPTER XXIV

DEMOCRITUS

AND now if this history be inclined to jump from one place to another in a somewhat inconsequent fashion, perhaps it will be forgiven, for with its hero wandering away by himself and the rest of the characters more or less congregated together, it takes some mental skipping to record their story.

Yet Peter was now not entirely lonely. He had picked up a chum, a pal, in the shape of a small and extremely mongrel puppy of a breed unknown, but it is to be supposed that wire-haired terrier predominated. And here is the manner of their first meeting.

When Peter left the cottage in the early morning he walked first to the market-town, where he posted two letters—one to the Lady Anne Garland and one to his publishers, telling them that at present he had no settled address, but that if

he wished to correspond with them later he would let them know. The consequence of this being that when a certain blue letter, addressed to him, arrived at their office it remained there, while they waited with what patience they might for word or sign from Peter. If he were a bit of a genius, and they were inclined to consider him so, his methods were also somewhat erratic.

Leaving the town, he turned his steps northward, and for no particular reason beyond the fact that he liked the look of the road. But perhaps it was really a certain unseen guidance which led his steps in that direction and made him of benefit to a small bundle of life embodied in a miserable little roll of dirty white hair, a stump of a baby tail, two short ears, four lanky little legs, a wet black nose, and a pair of really beautiful brown eyes. Often we see these beautiful eyes in an otherwise entirely ugly face. Perhaps it is not surprising, for after all they are the windows of the soul, and even a little doggy soul may be beautiful. But to proceed.

Peter walked along a dusty high-road till about noonday. It was an August day, as may be remembered, and breathless with the quiet heat

of that month when it happens to be really hot. Peter had not noticed the heat at first; external matters were at the moment outside his consideration. He had been tramping doggedly, mentally weary, the sun of the last few weeks blotted out, his horizon now veiled in grey clouds of dreariness.

And then at last his body began to protest. "If you will indulge in lovesick thoughts," it cried, "if your soul intends to give itself up to heartache and mental torment, at all events don't drag me into it. And it's very sure that if you will treat me with a bit more consideration you will be befriending your soul likewise." And Peter, seeing the force of the argument, laughed.

It was against all philosophy except that of the monks of old time to punish your body because your soul was sick. Body and soul were—at all events in his case, he argued—too closely allied. Perhaps those old monks who had found a key to spiritual things—a key on which Peter did not pretend to have laid a hand—might have had such a way of separating the two that the one did not suffer for the infirmities of the other. But Peter was one of us ordinary mortals to whom prayer and such-like on an empty stomach—or an over-

full one for that matter—would be a thing impossible. For his soul to be at ease his body must be comfortable, and most assuredly he was at the present moment increasing the discomfort of his soul by unduly fatiguing his body. It was an illogical proceeding, as he suddenly perceived.

A wood lay to the right of the road—a place of cool shadows and small dancing spots of gold, a silent place, still as the peace of some old cathedral.

Peter turned into it. He walked a little way across the green moss, till the leafy barrier of branches shut the high-road from his sight, and then sat down, his back against the purple and silver flecked trunk of a beech-tree. He unstrapped his wallet and laid it on the ground beside him. Then suddenly his ear caught a sound, a faint yelping cry of pain. It was as if some creature had for hours been imploring aid which did not come, as if it had sunk into a despairing silence, and then some tiny sound, some movement, had again awakened hope sufficient to make one last appeal.

Peter jumped to his feet.

“Now which way was it?” he queried. “From over there, if I’m not mistaken.” And he set off

farther into the wood. "It's an animal in a trap," he said, "a beastly trap. Curse the things!"

Many a time in his wanderings Peter had put a dumb creature out of its misery. And if you have ever heard a hare cry, and seen its soft eyes gazing at you till you'd vow it was an imprisoned human soul looking through its windows, you'd know the fury of rage against some of mankind that had possessed Peter more than once, and which possessed him now. He peered right and left among the undergrowth, his eyes and ears alert, yet seeing nothing, hearing nothing.

He stopped and whistled softly.

"Where are you, you poor little atom of life?" he cried.

And then, not a yard ahead of him, from a great bramble clump, came the tiniest, most pitiful cry, but with a little note of hope in it.

"Oh!" cried Peter, and the next instant he was on his knees, the steel jaws were pulled asunder, and a baby mongrel of a puppy was dragging itself feebly towards him, trying to lick his hand. "Oh, you poor little beggar!" said Peter, as he wrenched the trap from the ground and flung it into the middle of the bramble-bush. Then he lifted the

small bundle of rough, dirty white hair tenderly and carried it back to the beech-tree.

There he sat himself down and began to examine the wounded leg; it was terribly torn but mercifully not broken. Peter washed the wound with some water from his flask, and bound the leg with some strips he tore from his handkerchief, the small creature ecstatically licking his hand the while.

"You know," remonstrated Peter, "a thing of your size should not be wandering about alone. It's not correct. You might have known you'd get into difficulties."

The puppy paused in its licking to look into his face with brown speaking eyes. They might have told Peter a good deal—a sad little story of being hunted, hounded from place to place on account of his ugly little body, of a last frantic, terrified rush from a distant village, of presently trotting along a dusty road, of a turning into a wood which smelled pleasantly of rabbits and other things dear to a doggy nose, and of a final excruciating imprisonment, which had lasted through Heaven knows how long of torment, till a big human being in the shape of Peter had come to his

rescue. All this those eyes might have said. At all events, Peter read a bit of the story.

"I suppose, you poor atom," he said whimsically, "that no one wanted you, so you set out to forage on your own account. Well, we're both in the same boat. Shall we pull it together?"

It is not to be supposed that the puppy understood the precise words, but it unquestionably understood the tone, and it again fell to licking Peter's hand.

Peter ferreted in his wallet. He found bread and meat, and together they shared a meal. Water Peter poured into his palm, and the small creature lapped greedily. Finally it curled itself up beside him, and, despite a sore and wounded leg, dropped into a blissful and contented slumber. After a moment or so Peter followed its example. He had not, it will be guessed, slept the previous night, and he had been tramping since daybreak. So now here were two wayfarers forgetting their woes in slumber, though the puppy, it may be safely averred, was confident that his woes were over.

The sun was slanting low through the wood when Peter awakened. He opened his eyes and

looked around without moving. The puppy--the laziness of it!--had not stirred. But, then, who knows how many hours of puppy sleepiness it had not to make up.

"Ouf!" said Peter, stretching himself hugely.

The puppy woke, started, cringed, felt the wound in its leg, and yelped.

Peter picked it up with firm hands. "Now look here," he said solemnly, "we don't want any more fear. You've got to forget that. Do you understand? We're going to be comrades, pals, you and I; and we're both of us going to keep up brave hearts and cheer each other. You've got a wound in your leg, and I've got one in the region which I suppose is called the heart. You--you puppy thing! have the advantage over me, because with a bit of luck yours will mend in a few days. But anyhow, neither of us is going to whine. You're going to bark cheerfully and wag your tail, and I'm going to write--presently, and grin as well as I know how. The world would be quite a decent place if people would let it be so, and we're not going to add dulness to its poor old shoulders. It's borne quite enough in its time. Have you understood?"

A small red tongue trying to reach Peter's face testified to entire comprehension.

"Very well, then. Now come along, and as I presume you'd prefer not to walk on three legs I'll carry you. You're not much of a size, and only skin and bone at that."

Peter picked up his wallet and hitched his bundle to his back, which bundle was heavier than when we first met him. It now contained, further, a packet of manuscript, a writing-tablet, and—the foolishness of the vagabond!—a dress suit. The bundle adjusted to exactly that position which made its weight of the least concern, he tucked the small animal under his arm, with careful consideration for its wounded leg, and set off to the edge of the wood and once more down the dusty road. With some shrewdness, at the first two villages he passed, he hid the puppy under his coat with a whispered injunction to lie still, an injunction which was scrupulously observed. Only by the tiniest quivering of the body and the quick beat of the heart against Peter's arm was the smallest sign of movement and life betrayed. Villages, you perceive, were anathema to him, holding terror,

pain, and everything that was most unholy and unpleasant.

They slept in a barn that night. Before he slept Peter took out and examined his manuscript by the light of a candle. Then his face quivered.

"Not to-night," he said. "I can't. I will to-morrow."

He promised it like a child who cries "Honest Injun!" at the end of its speech.

"What would you do," asked Peter, addressing himself to the puppy, "if you felt uncommonly miserable and had made a promise to yourself and a puppy to be cheerful?"

The puppy looked at him, head on one side. Then it yawned, a large wide yawn that began and ended in something remarkably like a grin. Finally it crept to Peter and curled down beside him in slumber.

"Grin and bear it and sleep, I suppose," said Peter. "Puppy, you're a philosopher, and I think your name is Democritus."

CHAPTER XXV

AT A FAIR

AND so these two entered into partnership—a partnership that, on the side of Democritus, was marked by an entire adoration, the full and overwhelming love and trust of a dog's soul, and on Peter's by affection and a real sense of comfort in the small animal's companionship.

The days that passed were days of unbroken sunshine; England was revelling, as she rarely does, in long-continued sun and warmth. Peter spent the mornings and a good part of the afternoon in the shade of some coppice or in the shadow of some old quarry or haystack, engrossed in his writing, while Democritus at first lay curled beside him, and later, as the ugly wound healed, set off on rabbiting expeditions of his own, to return at noon and share Peter's midday meal.

After having worked for some weeks under a roof, Peter at first did not find it so easy to write

in the open. There were countless things to prove of distraction—the sunlight spots that danced on the ground beside him, the glint of a dragon-fly's wing, the butterflies that flitted in the sunshine, the bleating of sheep, the lowing of cows, the cry of the curlew, the plaintive pipe of the plover, all served to carry his thoughts into dreamy realms of fancy away from the work of the moment.

And in these realms there were three or four pictures that kept recurring to his mind. There was a woman sitting in the sunshine on a terrace, her hair warm and lustrous in the light. Peter would see again the indescribable note of race and breeding that predominated in her; see her eyes grey and shining; the warm ivory of her skin; her white hands long-fingered and slender, rose-tipped, with almond-shaped nails; the lines of her graceful figure; the whole fragrance, the warm vitality of her; and hear her low, round voice. There was a moonlight picture, elusive, full of a rare charm. There was a picture half-hidden in driving rain, and then a woman by his hearth, lifting a glass of red wine to her lips. And, lastly, a picture of a woman, looking at him, white, silent, her eyes holding depths of contempt.

And here Peter would catch his underlip with his teeth and turn again fiercely to his writing. It was gay writing, witty writing. His Wanderer wore his cap and bells finely, jesting right royally, and it would have needed a penetrating insight to recognize the sigh beneath the smile.

The world, as Peter had told Democritus, has borne much in her time. Through countless ages she has seen the sin, the sorrow, the pain of mankind; but she knows, if they could but realize it, that all this is as transitory as the barren days of winter that cover her, and that life and hope are never dead, but only sleeping, and will awake again with the spring. She tells us this times out of number. Every year she silently speaks her allegory, but it falls for the most part on unheeding ears. In the barren winter of our lives it is not easy to believe that spring will once more wake for us, that however long and dreary the grey months, somewhere and at some time the spring will dawn. Peter was facing his winter bravely, but he could not yet believe that one day the sun would shine again for him, the birds sing, the flowers bloom. For all his outward gaiety, the present physical warmth and sunshine only served

to emphasize his mental winter. But Nature knew and did her best to cheer him, and to tell him that our interior spring and summer, though their advent is sure, do not always accord with hers.

One day, somewhere about the middle of September, Peter reached a small town. He was progressing slowly northward, but as he spent a considerable part of his time in writing his progress was by no means hurried.

In this town a fair was in full swing, and Peter was reminded of a letter he had once received, which talked of another fair—one in the South of England.

It was a gay scene enough, and Peter, with Democritus, at his heels, paused a while to watch it. There were crowds of people in holiday attire; there were endless couples—girl and swain. There were coco-nut shies; there were merry-go-rounds of horses and boat-cars, which revolved to some excruciating music (so-called), set in motion by the machinery which worked the highly coloured wooden horses and cars. There were stalls covered with miscellaneous articles of marvellous,

manufacture—glass vases with undulated edges, beginning white at the base and slowly increasing in colour from pale pink to a violent ruby; china mugs and cups covered with floreate designs or flags, between two of which King George and Queen Mary stared forth with painted pained surprise. There were gilt clocks, boxes of sweets, tin butter-dishes politely called silver, and all the rest of the articles which usually adorn the stalls at a fair.

A number of these articles were displayed on a circular table covered with red twill and surrounded by a barricade, beside which stood a man with a number of small hoops in his hand. In a loud voice he was urging the onlookers to try their luck. The hoops, it appeared, were to be loaned to them at the rate of three a penny; they were then to be flung quoit-like over any article on the table. Provided they fell surrounding the article without touching it, it became the property of the thrower. If you had ill-luck you had disbursed your money with no result; moderate luck would bring you a packet of sweets or a china dog or cat, and by surprising good luck you might become the possessor of a certain largish gilt clock or a

ruby vase, and all for a sum which might be the fraction of a penny. It sounded seductive, and the throwers of the hoops were fairly numerous, though the acquirers of prizes were few. The wooden hoop had an unpleasant way of falling against the article required and propping itself up by it as though too tired for further exertion. But the throwers, with the hearts of born gamblers, continued to throw and hope for better things, till diminishing coppers or entirely empty pockets sent them sadly away. Naturally there was an occasional piece of luck, which fired the assembly to fresh enthusiasm.

Peter stood still to watch, amused by the wild vagaries of the wooden hoops. Suddenly a small voice at his elbow spoke.

"It ain't easy, is it? I've thrown a shilling on that there table and not got so much as a penny packet o' sweets. It's dis'eartening!"

Peter looked round. At his elbow was a small and ugly girl, possibly the ugliest girl on which it had ever been his fortune to set eyes. Her pale, square face was covered with freckles, her eyes, small and green, were like little slits, her nose—a mere apology for that feature—was a dab in the

middle of her face, her mouth wide and formless.

"Apparently it is not easy," said Peter politely. And then he removed his eyes from her face, fearing that his astonishment at her plainness might be perceived by her.

She sighed. "I wish I 'adn't thrown my shilling on that there table. It's the third year now as I've made a fool of myself, and not a penny left for the 'orses nor nothin'. 'Tisn't as if I were one o' the girls wot folks treat. 'Oo could, with a face like mine?"

There was no complaint in the remark. It was not even a hint to Peter; it was merely the grave statement of a fact, with the explanation of the reason for it.

"Why," asked Peter solemnly, "did you throw your money on that table?"

She came a trifle nearer to him, and spoke in a whisper.

"It's them two things," she said. "That there vase—the crimson one with the white snake a-curling round it, and the gold clock. I've watched 'em now for three years, and me 'eart's in me mouth lest some one should get the 'oops over. I can't get away from 'ere, nor enjoy the fair no

'ow for watchin', so the 'orses and boats wouldn't be much good even if I 'adn't throwed that shilling away." It was poured forth in a rapid undertone, as if the mere mention of her longing might lead a hoop to encircle either of the two coveted treasures.

Peter eyed them gravely. Of course they were unutterably hideous, that went without saying; but there they were, representing the goal—unattainable—of three years' ambition.

"I wonder—" said Peter, and stopped. He had once had some skill as a player of quoits. He drew a copper from his pocket. "I'll have three of those hoops," he said to the man in charge of the stall.

The Ugly Little Girl watched him, anxiety in her eyes. Democritus, at his master's heels, was regarding the proceedings unperturbed.

Peter flung one hoop; it fell on the table and rested in its usual melancholy fashion against a china figure. The Ugly Little Girl heaved a sigh of relief; she felt that her confidence had been misplaced.

Peter threw again. The hoop fell fairly over the gilt clock.

"Good!" said the owner of the stall, with an attempt at cheerfulness. And he picked up the hoop, handing Peter the clock.

Amazed, wrathful, fighting with her tears, the Ugly Little Girl watched Peter. He threw a third time. The ruby vase with the white snake climbing up it was neatly encircled. The man handed it to Peter in a melancholy fashion.

"More 'oops?" he asked dejectedly.

"Not at the moment," returned Peter jauntily, and he moved away. The Ugly Little Girl was no longer at his elbow.

Peter worked his way through the group of envious admirers round the stall, and at a little distance he saw her. He walked in her direction, Democritus at his heels.

"Permit me," quoth Peter as he approached.

She turned round; her eyes were full of tears, her mouth distorted in a grimace of woe.

"Now, by all the gods," exclaimed Peter, amazed, "what's the matter with the child?"

"Might 'ave known you'd 'ave got them. Might 'ave known the luck was all agin me."

"Ye gods and little fishes!" cried Peter, raising his eyes to the sky. "And how was I to know

you wanted the honour of throwing the blessed little wooden hoops yourself? I fancied it was the mere possession of the gorgeous articles that you coveted."

"What d'you mean?" she queried.

"I acquired these treasures," returned Peter, "with the sole intention of presenting them to you. If, however, I have been mistaken——"

"For me!" It had never dawned upon her that any one would willingly part with such treasures, once acquired.

"Of course," said Peter patiently, "for you. May I ask what else you imagined I was going to do with them?" He held the gilt clock and the ruby vase towards her.

Her ugly face was all a-quiver with rapture. "Oh!" she breathed, and she looked at Peter with adoring eyes.

"Here, take them!" laughed Peter.

She took them tenderly, still half-unbelieving in her good fortune.

"I never thought," she whispered, "that no one would 'ave thrown 'oops for me. Oh, I say!"

Peter looked at her, and then some spirit took

possession of him. Perhaps it was one of enterprise, perhaps it was one of mischief, perhaps it was one of kindness, or perhaps—and this is more probable—it was a mixture of all three.

“Shall we do the fair together?” he asked.

It was her turn now to look at him. Incredulity, joy, and something akin to tears struggled for the mastery. The last are apt to come to the surface at a kindness to one not used to it.

“I—I—d’you mean it?” she asked, ecstatic.

“With all the faith in the world,” replied Peter.

“Come along.”

They were an odd trio—the tall, lean man in his shabby coat and trousers and the fantastic peacock feather in his hat, the small ugly girl in her tawdry finery, the mongrel puppy which trotted solemnly at Peter’s heels.

To the Ugly Little Girl it was a never-to-be-forgotten afternoon. She had a man all of her own, and one, too, who flung shillings abroad with never so much as a hint at his reckless expenditure. Never again was she to care for the pitying looks cast upon her lonely self by the other girls who walked abroad with their swains. Never again was she lonely. Her life was to hold a

dream-knight, a man with sad eyes and a whimsical smile, who had fêted her throughout one glorious September day. And her dream was infinitely more beautiful than any other girl's reality, for in it her man was ever courtly, ever considerate, laughing, gay, with odd little speeches that somehow tugged at her heart-strings and brought the happy tears to her eyes. There was never a blow, never a harsh word, such as fell too often to the lot of the others. Thrice happy Ugly Little Girl, with her one day of innocent joy and her dream throughout her life!

As for Peter, having undertaken the rôle of swain, you may be sure he played his part royally. He whirled on wooden horses till his brain was dizzy, while Democritus, from the safety of the solid earth, watched his antics in dumb amazement, marvelling at his undignified proceedings. He bought and ate waffles made by a stout woman with a motherly face, who blessed the two in a way that caused the Ugly Little Girl to blush scarlet and convulsed Peter with inward laughter; he bought sticks of sugar-candy and huge peppermints called "humbugs"; and finally he watched a hunchbacked harlequin, in green and gold spangles,

turn somersaults and jest for the motley herd around him.

The Ugly Little Girl gazed in awestruck wonder, laughing every now and then in a spasm of merriment. Suddenly she looked up and saw Peter's face.

"Don't it make you laugh?" she queried. "Ain't it funny?"

"For the crowd, perhaps," answered Peter. "But for the harlequin—" He shrugged his shoulders, and the Ugly Little Girl somehow understood and ceased to smile.

Later they saw him outside a tent; he was jesting no longer. Morose, silent, he was gazing on the ground. Peter said a word or two, insignificant but friendly.

"Ah!" said the fellow, looking up; "you can see the man beneath the fool."

"Many of us wear the cap and bells," said Peter. "It's better to raise a laugh than be an object of pity to a non-understanding multitude."

"You, too!" said the man. "Another in the world with a laugh on his lips and an ache at his heart!"

"Sighing won't ease the ache," said Peter;

"and a laugh is often more dignified than a groan."

"You're right there," was the answer. "And a laughing fool is better than a moping wise man."

"Well said!" quoth Peter. And then there was a call from within the tent, and the harlequin vanished with a nod.

"I understand," said the Ugly Little Girl slowly. "It ain't nice to be laughed at because you 'ave an ugly body, but it's better to let folk laugh at you and laugh with them than go around with a long face. It's comfortin' to think that God don't take no account of your body. They say as 'ow 'E made it, but I'm thinking as it's your father and mother 'as a good 'and in it, and it ain't fair to lay all the blame on God."

"Oh no," said Peter airily but vaguely, and completely at a loss for a suitable reply. And then he bethought him of the coco-nut shies, and led the way in that direction.

"Ain't you givin' me a time!" said the Ugly Little Girl gleefully.

Much later, in the gathering dusk, there was dancing; and, as is the way with fairs, a certain roughness and rowdyism began to prevail. Peter

had his own ideas as to the propriety of certain places for women, of whatever class.

"It is time you left," he remarked coolly.

She glanced up, surprised.

"It is," said Peter authoritatively, "too rough here now for a woman."

She blushed with pleasure. The other swains would keep their girls there till Heaven knows what o'clock.

"Where do you live?" demanded Peter.

"In Watermill Street," she replied, meek, delighted. And then, with a sudden burst of honesty, "I'm—I'm only a maid-of-all-work."

"Jack-of-all-trades," smiled Peter. "I'll give myself the pleasure of escorting you to your door."

They walked through the deserted streets. Every man abroad was at the fair. Democritus followed. It had been a day of perplexity to him.

The Ugly Little Girl was fumbling with one hand at her neck; in the other arm she held the precious clock and vase.

"What," asked Peter politely, "is the trouble? Can I assist you?"

"'Ere, 'old them a minute, will you?" She thrust the clock and vase towards him. Peter

took them. She fumbled now with both hands, and in a moment brought them away, holding in them a small medal, one of the Immaculate Conception. It was attached to a thick boot-lace.

Peter gazed at her.

"I 'aven't nothin' else worth 'avin'," she said hurriedly. "Father Mordaunt 'e blessed it for me. I'd—I'd like you to take it."

Peter looked from the medal and boot-lace to the ugly, imploring face.

"Oh, but—" he said, and he hesitated. It was obviously a great possession.

"Father Mordaunt 'e'd never mind," she said earnestly; "and—and Our Lady'll understand, seein' as 'ow it's the only thing I've got to give you, and you've made me so 'appy." She still tendered it, wistful, anxious.

Peter took it, and dropped it, boot-lace and all, into his pocket.

"Thank you," he said quietly, with no trace of whimsical nonsense now in his tone.

Then she took the clock and vase again from him, and they turned into Watermill Street. At a door she paused.

"I ain't goin' to try and say thank you," she

whispered, "because I can't. I know you're a real gentleman—not only by your speech, but by the way you've treated me so considerate and good. I'll pray to Our Lady for you as long as ever I live, and ask 'Er to give you whatever you wants most. And I'll begin this very night."

"Oh," smiled Peter, "you queer, dear little girl!" But though he smiled his eyes were a trifle misty. It had been, after all, a mere freak of fancy on his part to play the squire of dames to a small maid-of-all-work that afternoon. He felt himself to be a bit of a fraud, undeserving of this wealth of gratitude. He crushed the small work-worn fingers hard in his.

And so the two parted. It had been a trifling incident; but, after all, it is rather pleasant to think of, as somehow characteristic of Peter.

CHAPTER XXVI

ON THE CLOUD

It was about the third week in January that Peter reached a certain town named Congleton, and leaving it behind him, walked towards a mountain named the Cloud.

The weather was now inclement; cold winds blew, driving showers of sleet and rain assailed him, making the progress of the vagabond Peter far from pleasant.

Bundle on back, his hands deep in the pockets of a rough frieze overcoat he had purchased some three months previously, he tramped along the road, Democritus at his heels. It might well be wondered why Peter did not seek some lodging during these inclement months, and in answer there is nothing to say beyond the fact that a certain odd strain in him led him to continue his present mode of living. He preferred inclemency of weather, entire isolation, to life

under a roof, with the chance of meeting his fellow-men. Perhaps it was strange, but after all had he not already spent more than two years on the roads, so may not the love of the open have taken possession of him? At all events it is not what he might have done, but what he actually did, with which this history has to deal.

Somewhere up on the top of the Cloud, with its back to a small wood of pines and with a strip of moorland and then the road in front of it, stands a small deserted hut. It is no more than a hovel of one tiny room, and perhaps at one time it was used as a shepherd's shelter.

It was drawing on to the wintry dusk when Peter saw it in the gloom, lying to the left of him from the road. He crossed the strip of moorland and went towards it. He found it, as he had fancied he might, entirely empty. There was a hole in the roof through which the rain was driving and the broken door rattled on its hinges. It was very different from a cottage he had discovered some months previously, but it was at all events some kind of shelter, and the cold without was bitter.

"We'll take possession," said Peter to Demo-

critus. "It cannot be styled a princely habitation—in fact, it's uncommonly wretched. But I fancy it will be more desirable than the road to-night."

He unfastened his bundle and set it on the earth floor. Outside the wind howled in fury; mist, rain, and gathering dusk blotted out the landscape beyond the road.

"Ugh!" said Peter with a shudder, "it's remarkably unpleasant."

He unpacked his bundle. There was half a loaf of bread, a tin of sardines, a bottle of water, a small flask of whisky, and a bone with some meat on it for Democritus.

They finished their meal together, and then Peter still sat with his back to the wall, as far away from the broken door as possible, watching the rain that fell through the hole in the roof. For nearly the first time since he had begun his wanderings he was physically wretched. Fate had for a short time lifted his mental loneliness from him, only to plunge him deeper into it. Mental loneliness, however, he had done his best to accept with what philosophy he might, but now physical loneliness, entire discomfort, and bodily

depression were weighing hard upon him. He felt he had lost the grit to fight further. A quixotic action of long ago suddenly presented itself to him as an entirely idiotic proceeding on his part. Why on earth had he ruined his own life, cut himself off from communion with his fellow-men, for a mere romantic notion?

"I'm beaten," said Peter to himself, "done! I fancied I was doing a fine thing. I thought myself, no doubt, a bit of a hero; and now I'm a coward, a turncoat, who'd give a very great deal to undo the past."

He was wretched, entirely wretched, and even the soft warm tongue of Democritus against his hand was of no smallest comfort to him.

He looked at the bundle on the ground beside him. It contained his manuscript, fair, complete but for the title and signature and the dedication should he choose to give it one. It brought him no atom of pleasure; it appeared to him worthless, a thing of false sentiment, talking of high courage, of nobility of thought, which in reality vanished like a pricked air-bubble the moment the finger of fact was laid upon it.

How in the name of fortune had he kept his

spirits buoyed up all these years? And why in Heaven's name had the buoyancy suddenly deserted him? Peter turned about in his mind for a solution of the problem. Presently he found it. It came with something like a shock. He was older, that was the reason. Close on six years had rolled over his head since the day he had surrendered all for an extravagant notion. It is the young, Peter reflected sagely, who take their all and throw it with both hands on the altar of sacrifice. They do not realize—how should they in their youthful optimism?—what they are giving up. They have never known monotony, the grey years that roll by with nothing in heaven or earth to break their dulness.

"Something will happen to make up to us," they cry. But—so Peter reflected from the wisdom of his present vast age (he was two-and-thirty be it stated)—nothing does happen. We burn our all heroically, and then are surprised to find that there is no life in the grey ashes left to us. His optimism had gone, vanished, and nothing but a deep pessimism remained to him.

"It's no use, Democritus," he said, as with tongue and wagging tail the small creature tried

to cheer this terrible mood that had fallen upon his master, "it's no use. I've made a mull of things, and perhaps it's just as well to know when I am beaten. And yet if——"

Unpleasant little word, which so often prefaces all the joys that might have been and are not.

Bear with Peter in his present mood. The marvel is it had never fallen upon him before, and that it had not must be accounted for by the fact that youth, health, and what had appeared as indomitable good spirits were all in his favour.

It is useless, however, to dwell on his misery. Picture him, if you will, as wretched as man well could be. He was, after all, only human, and up till now he had fought his fight bravely.

He slept little throughout the night. About midnight the wind dropped suddenly, and by the light of a candle he saw snowflakes falling through the hole in the roof. He was trying to console himself with Conard's life of Beethoven, which he had purchased; but with the remembrance of the woman who had recommended him to read it before his mind, the consolation was not overgreat.

Towards morning he fell into a fitful slumber which lasted till dawn. Then he awakened, roused himself, yawned and stretched. The memory of his mood of the previous night recurred to his mind. He felt suddenly ashamed, though there had been none but his own soul and Democritus to witness it. Courage, high-handed, sprang again within him. He flung last night's mood behind him, and brave-eyed faced the future. And with what is to follow it is good to think that he did so.

He got up, and went to the cottage door.

The earth lay snow-covered and very still. Since midnight the air had been thick with feathery flakes falling gently, silently. Just before dawn they had ceased, and now the world lay under the soft mantle. White and spectre-like the trees reared their branches against the cold grey sky. Only here and there the berries of the holly and the rowan-tree gleamed scarlet against the snow. A little stream that in summer made faint music as it wended its way to the right of the hut, finally losing itself in the shadow of the pinewood, was now frost-bound and silent. Over everything lay an intense stillness, an un-

earthly purity. The ground before the hut was covered with curious little star-like lines imprinted in the snow, the impress of the feet of feathered wayfarers seeking for food which was not to be found.

And then through the silent frosty air came clear sounds—the barking of a sheepdog, the clarion note of a cock in an outlying farmyard, and, very distant, the sound of a church clock chiming the hour.

The eastern sky began to flush with colour. An amber light stole upward through the grey, turning to rose and then to deeper crimson. The white earth pulsated, breathed, awakened. Softly it reflected the crimson of the sky, and then slowly, majestically, the sun, a glowing ball of fire, came up over the horizon.

Peter stood gazing at the fairy magic of the scene. It was a pure transformation after the bleak dreariness of the previous night.

And then suddenly he saw a man coming along the road—a man tall, broad-shouldered, of a build akin to his own. A thick coat covered him, its fur collar well pulled up to his ears; a cloth cap was on his head.

"Hullo," said Peter to himself, "he's early a-foot!"

The man paused, looked in the direction of the hut, then turned and tramped quickly across the snow towards him. As he came nearer Peter saw a pleasant freckled face, brown eyes like a dog's, a firm short chin, and a small reddish moustache.

Within three or four yards of him the stranger halted and spoke.

"Is your name, by good luck, Peter Carden?"

"It is," said Peter, surprised, wondering.

"Thank Heaven!" murmured he of the freckles piously. "I've found you at last! Come along back to the hotel with me and we'll talk as we go. I'm famishing for breakfast."

CHAPTER XXVII

A MIRACLE

AND here it is necessary to record certain things which led up to this—to Peter—most extraordinary of meetings: things which those who do not believe in the miracles wrought by love and prayer might regard as almost incredible coincidences.

One afternoon, it was in the week between Christmas and the New Year, Father O'Sullivan was in the Westminster Hospital. He had been with a sick man for the last half-hour or so, cheering him on his high-road to recovery. He had only just left him—he was, in fact, in the corridor—when a nursing Sister, a Catholic, came up to him.

“Father,” she said, “there’s a man—a gentleman—who would like to see you; he’s a Catholic and dying. I asked him to let me send for a

priest yesterday, and again to-day, but he refused. A few moments ago, however, I happened to mention your name and say that you were in the hospital. He asked me then to fetch you."

"Ah!" said Father O'Sullivan, smoothing his chin, as was the way with him—if he had worn a beard he would have been stroking it; "where is he?"

"In here, Father." And she led the way through a ward, and into a small room that opened out of it.

Father O'Sullivan looked at the man lying on the bed. His eyes were closed, and his face almost deathly pale against the red coverlet which was pulled up to his chin.

Father O'Sullivan sat down by the bedside. The man opened his eyes and looked at him.

"Well, Father," he said, with a faint attempt at a smile.

And then, in spite of the pallor, the thinness, Father O'Sullivan recognized him. He saw in him a man he had known from boyhood, one who had attended his confessional, though for about six years he had entirely lost sight of him.

"Hugh Ellerslie!" exclaimed he.

"You remember me?" said Hugh.

"Of course, of course," replied Father O'Sullivan, "though it's six years or thereabouts since I saw you."

"I know," said Hugh wearily. "I want to talk to you, Father. They tell me I'm dying."

"Well, now," said the old priest compassionately, "and if that's so, isn't it a good thing I'm here to help you make your peace, to have you tell me what it is is troubling you?"

For a moment Hugh was silent.

"I've a confession to make, Father," he said presently. The Sister moved towards the door.

"No," said Hugh, "don't go. How long have I got to live?"

"Some hours at least," said the Sister gently.

Hugh smiled. "Well, you'd better both hear what I've got to say. It won't take long, but I can think of nothing else till I've said it. Perhaps you, Sister, will write down what is necessary. I can sign it presently, and, at all events, there will be two witnesses."

At a sign from Father O'Sullivan the nurse crossed to the other side of the bed.

"Now, my son," said Father O'Sullivan quietly, tenderly.

"I have let another man suffer instead of me," said Hugh steadily. "His name—please get that down clearly, Sister—is Peter Carden."

Father O'Sullivan did not move, but he drew a long breath. And there are some people who say that the age of miracles is past!

"There's no need to enter into all particulars," went on Hugh; "it would mean rather complicated business details that really don't signify. But get this down clearly. About five or six years ago, Peter Carden was accused of forgery and embezzlement. He was put on his trial and pleaded guilty. He got three years in Portland Gaol. He was innocent; he was shielding me. Everything of which he was accused, and to which he pleaded guilty, was done by me. Is that clear, Father?"

"Perfectly clear, my son."

"We were friends," went on Hugh, "school friends, college friends. Peter always hauled me out of scrapes. He stuck to me through thick and thin. I believe this last time it was as much for my old mother's sake as mine that

he stood by me. She was very fond of Peter. I said," a slow colour mounted in the white face, "that it was for her sake that I let him do it; it wasn't—at least, not only that. I was a coward. She died about a year after Peter had been in prison. I might have come forward then. I didn't; I went abroad. I came back to England only about six months ago." He stopped.

"Anything else?" asked Father O'Sullivan gravely and tenderly.

"That's all," said Hugh wearily, "at least, with regard to that. I'd like Peter to know that, cur though I've been to him, I've always been fond of him. Tell him, if you can, Father, that I've tried to run straight since, because of him and what he did. I wasn't getting on badly, but now——"

"He shall be told," said Father O'Sullivan.

"Do you know where he is?" asked Hugh. "You speak as if you knew him."

"I've heard of him," replied Father O'Sullivan, "and though I don't know where he is now, he shall be found."

Again Hugh was silent. After a moment he spoke.

"If you've got all that down, Sister, I'll sign it. You're sure it will be all right, Father; that it will let every one know, and clear him entirely?"

"Perfectly sure."

The Sister put the paper by Hugh's hand, and he signed a straggling, wavering signature. He let the pen fall. Then he looked up at the Sister.

"Now," he said, "there are other things. Will you——?"

And the Sister left the room, closing the door noiselessly behind her.

It was after seven o'clock before Father O'Sullivan finally left the hospital. He had left it once to fetch the Sacraments for which Hugh had asked. And then, when the full peace of forgiveness and union had fallen upon him, he had lain very still.

Once when Father O'Sullivan had moved he had spoken wistfully.

"Must you go, Father?"

"Not at all, as long as you're caring for me to be with you."

Hugh turned his face on the pillow.

"If it hadn't been you this afternoon, Father!" he said.

"The good God understood that," said Father O'Sullivan calmly, "and just sent me along to see Tim Donoghue, who's the very saint of a fellow when he's sick, and would have me be reading to him and praying for him by the hour, and me with other jobs to be looking after."

"We're all like that, perhaps," said Hugh, smiling.

"Faith, and it's a good thing too," was the reply. "And to whom but your Mother should you be going when you're sick, and in whose arms but hers should you be dying?"

And then there was a silence, broken occasionally by little remarks from Hugh, who, coward though he might have been once, and more than once, was no coward now that he was dying. And Father O'Sullivan had responded with little tender speeches, such as a mother indeed might make to a child.

And now he was walking towards Muriel's house in Cadogan Place, and thanking God in his kind, big old heart for a soul which had passed peacefully away.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE FINE WAY

I

“AND so,” said Father O’Sullivan, blowing his nose, “I came right along to tell you, and ask you what is the next step to take.”

“Poor chap!” ejaculated Tommy, delivering himself of a huge sigh. He was standing on the hearthrug, immaculately attired in dinner jacket, white shirt-front, and all the rest of the paraphernalia.

Muriel gave a little choke. She was sitting near him in a dress of her favourite pale green. Father O’Sullivan had descended on them both as they were waiting in the drawing-room for the announcement of dinner. It had, be it stated, already been made, but little heed had been paid thereto, and the butler in wrathful terms was now ordering the soup to be taken below again.

"And what are you both looking so glum about?" demanded Father O'Sullivan fiercely. "Faith, and weren't you having me say Masses, and yourself setting up candles to St. Joseph, that that young Quixote—what's-his-name—might hold up his head again? And now that the good Lord has answered our prayers and cleared him, and let that poor boy make a good confession and pass peacefully away, you're looking as mournful as a mute at a funeral. Was it perhaps some other way you'd have been having God arrange things and not His way at all?" He stuffed his handkerchief back vigorously in his pocket as he spoke.

"But," quoth Tommy in a slightly haughty fashion, feeling this speech somewhat of an aspersion on his wife's wet eyes, "you will not, I imagine, deny that it was sad?"

"Sad! Of course it was sad, what happened first. But can't you see the fine way, the beautiful way, God has taken away the sadness? You're all for saying Paradise must be a grand place, but directly a soul gets a bit nearer to it you're for weeping and wailing and crying 'Poor fellow!' "

Muriel choked back her tears. Smiling at the old priest and the half-wrathful Tommy, she spoke.

"And you're just as near crying yourself as I am, Father," she protested. "And it's that is making you so abominably rude and cross to us both."

"Huh!" said Father O'Sullivan, and he coughed, putting up his hand to his mouth. And both cough and gesture hid that his lips were trembling.

"And now," he requested after a moment, his voice steady and a trifle dry, "what's to be done next?"

"Find Mr. Carden, of course," announced Muriel with airy decision, as who should say that was a fact apparent to the most infantine intelligence.

"And it's all very well to say 'Find him,'" remarked Father O'Sullivan dryly, "but have you the faintest suspicion of a notion where he is at all?"

"Not the least," quoth Muriel cheerfully; "that is exactly what we have to discover."

"And how will you be doing that may I ask?"

Muriel leant forward, finger-tips pressed to-

gether, speaking with the decision of one who has thoroughly weighed the whole problem.

"First we must tell General Carden, and see if he knows where he is. I don't think he does, but we must find out for certain. Then there are his publishers—oh, yes," in answer to Tommy's elevated eyebrows—"he has written a book, a very good book indeed, and thereby hangs more of a tale than is enclosed within *its* covers. Failing both those plans," she concluded firmly, "Tommy must find him."

"Faith," said Father O'Sullivan admiringly, "it's a fine thing to be a husband!"

And then a second time the drawing-room door opened, and a second time a voice announced, this time in accents of deep reproach, that dinner was on the table.

Muriel looked at both the men. "Oh," she cried, "didn't he tell us that before? I feel apologetic. He's such a treasure, and so is the cook—both artists in their way, and we're spoiling their artistic efforts. Come, both of you. We'll talk more at dinner." A whirl of chiffons and daintiness, she led the way downstairs.

In the intervals of the servant's absence from

the room, she promulgated plans, like any old veteran at the beginning of a campaign. If they sounded somewhat fantastic plans it is certain that neither man had any better to offer. And what, in her opinion, was more feasible, more practicable, than that Tommy should take the car to Abbotsleigh, where Peter was last seen by Anne, and from there scour the country for a man with a peacock feather in his hat? It was, she assured them both, the simplest of proceedings.

By the end of dinner they had warmed to her ideas, confessing at least that no better solution of the difficulty presented itself to them. Further, she told them, and on this point she was firm, that they must both go that very evening and tell General Carden the present state of affairs. For herself, she thought Anne was expecting her. Yes; she was convinced Anne was expecting her, but she would telephone through and make sure while they were finishing their cigars. Thus she departed from the room.

Anne's voice at the other end of the telephone presently answered her. Yes, she would be at home that evening, and delighted to see Muriel. But what was the matter of importance of which

Muriel had to speak? Too long to communicate at the moment? Oh, well, Anne must possess her soul in patience till Muriel arrived.

And then Muriel hung up the receiver, and rang for the footman, on whose appearance she ordered him to tell her maid to bring a cloak immediately, and stated also that she would require a taxi in ten minutes. Then, as one who has put great things in train, she sank back in a chair with a sigh of relief and content.

II

General Carden was in his smoking-room when the opening of the door by Goring heralded the entrance of Tommy Lancing and a stout, elderly priest.

Somewhat perplexed, General Carden put down the book he had been reading, and rose from his chair to greet them. True, Tommy occasionally favoured him with his presence at this hour, but why should he drag along with him a man whom he had only once met, and that man, moreover, a priest? He appeared, too, somewhat embarrassed. It was the elder man who was at his ease.

"We came to see you, General," said Tommy,

shaking hands and introducing Father O'Sullivan, "because we thought—that is, Muriel—well, something unusual has happened." Neither speech nor introduction was made after Tommy's customary suave fashion.

"Ah!" said General Carden, eyeing them both keenly, while his heart gave a little anxious throb. Unusual news can easily portend bad news. Also Tommy's manner was a trifle disconcerting.

"It is," said Tommy, "about your son."

"Ah!" said General Carden again, this time with a quick intake of his breath. He put his hand up to the mantelpiece. The floor seemed not quite so solid as he would desire it to be.

"He," blurted out Tommy quickly, "was—was not guilty. Father O'Sullivan will tell you."

Thus in the simplest, most commonplace of language can momentous announcements be made. It would seem as though there should be a grander language, a finer flow of words, for these statements and yet in such bald fashion are they invariably announced.

There was no question now but that the room

was certainly revolving. Presently it steadied itself, and General Carden knew that he was sitting by the fire, the two men opposite to him, and that the old priest was talking. Gradually his mind adjusted itself to facts: he heard and understood the words that were being spoken. When they stopped there was a silence. There is so astonishingly little to be said at such times, though the tittle-tattle of small events will supply us with endless talk.

"Thank you for coming to tell me," said General Carden gravely, and he pushed a box of cigars towards the two men. Again silence.

Presently Tommy began to talk, quietly, easily, now. He put forward Muriel's suggestions, her advice, her plans. He explained minutely the scheme she had proposed.

General Carden listened intent.

"It is like her kind-heartedness to suggest it," he said, as Tommy paused, "and yours to follow it up. I have no notion where he is, nor—nor have his publishers. I happened to ask them the other day." He made the statement with an airy carelessness of manner.

"Then," said Tommy with a firmness which

Muriel would distinctly have approved, "I start to-morrow."

Thus definitely was the decision given.

The two stayed a while longer, Tommy supplying most of the remarks made—conversation it can not be termed.

General Carden kept falling into abstracted silences, in which his eyes sought the fire and his hand pulled gently at his white moustache. Father O'Sullivan watched him from under his shaggy eyebrows. He was not a priest for nothing. He knew well enough how to read the vast unsaid between the little said, and the workings of the reserved old mind were as clear as daylight to him.

Presently they rose to depart. In the hall General Carden spoke.

"If," he said, addressing himself to Father O'Sullivan, "you would let me know the day and hour of young Ellerslie's funeral I should be obliged. He was a friend of my son's."

And in those words the old man blotted out, forgave, the wrong Hugh had done, as Peter himself would have wished.

An hour later Goring came in with a tray on

which were a tumbler and a jug of hot water.

General Carden looked up. "Which wine did I drink to-night?" he demanded.

"The '54 port, sir," replied Goring respectfully.

"Hmm!" General Carden beat a faint, delicate tattoo with his fingers on the table. "I thought so. How much more is there?"

"About eight bottles, sir. Seven or eight I should say."

General Carden coughed. "You need not use any more of it at present, not till"—he coughed again—"Mr. Peter comes home."

The most perfectly trained of butlers might, perhaps, be excused a slight start at such a statement, taking into consideration, of course, previous circumstances. Goring unquestionably started. Then the mask was on again, impassive, impenetrable.

General Carden still kept up that light tattoo. He had a statement to make. In all fairness to Peter it had to be made. It was, however, peculiarly difficult to put into words.

He cleared his throat. "There was," he said, gazing hard at his fingers, "a mistake. Mr.

Peter was shielding some one else." The tattoo stopped. The words were out.

And then the man broke through the butler. The mask of impassivity vanished.

"Lord, sir!" his voice was triumphant, "and mightn't we 'ave known it, if only we 'adn't been such a couple of blithering old fools."

General Carden stared. "Ahem! Goring—really, Goring, I—" He was for a moment dumbfounded, helpless in his amazement. Then suddenly the amazement gave way before a humorous smile, his old eyes twinkled, and he brought his hand down on the table with a thump. "By God!" he cried; "you're right."

And Goring left the room choking with varied emotions, but pulling down his waistcoat with dignified pleasure the while.

CHAPTER XXIX

FOUND

HERE, now, are the present employment and emotions of five of our characters—Tommy, with car and chauffeur, off to Devonshire, which was to be the starting-point of his search for a man with a peacock feather in his hat; General Carden watching hourly (though it was far too soon to begin to watch) for a telegram which should acquaint him of the success of the search; Anne alternating between waves of pride and despair and delicious secret joy; and Muriel spending hours with St. Joseph, imploring the dear Saint to hurry up with the job he had so successfully begun.

The intervals between these visits she spent mainly with Anne, rejoicing with her in her happier moods, encouraging, chiding, sympathizing when the waves of despair rolled high. Muriel alone knew to the full the heart of this

woman friend of hers, saw the proud spirit a captive between the hands of Love, realized what the captivity meant to her.

As for our fifth character, Millicent Sheldon, a pretty truthful rumour of Tommy's expedition having reached her, her feelings were at first distinctly mixed, though it is certain that presently she found a method of adjusting them to her own satisfaction. After all, it was unquestionably the hand of Providence which had removed the somewhat impecunious Peter from her life and given her in exchange the solid Theobald Horatio, with his equally solid income acquired from the patent of the little brushes which, being fixed behind carts, kept the London streets in a cleanly condition. It is not to be supposed that she dwelt upon these brushes; those articles had long ago been firmly obliterated from her mind. It was in the solid income alone that she saw the hand of Providence and realized that all had undoubtedly been for the best. Had Peter's innocence been apparent from the outset, there would have been no excuse for the letter she had penned him at the time of his release from jail. Of a former letter, written on the first hearing of his accusation and conviction,

she did not care to think. If she thought of it at all at this juncture it was to tell herself the letter had been prompted by an impulse of pity, the folly of which was shown her later by calm reason. That reason had been aided by the advent of Theobald Horatio Sheldon on her horizon, she naturally did not care to allow. It was, however, her inadvertent mention of this first letter and the subsequent events to Anne which had caused her to break a second time in Anne's eyes.

But why dwell on her further? Let her remain satisfied, as she protests she is, in the possession of her Theobald, her little Theobalda, and her Theobald's solid income. Her influence on these pages has ceased; our acquaintance with her may well cease also.

Tommy's expedition was certainly not all joy. The month of January is hardly one to be willingly chosen for a motor tour through England, and the weather was distinctly unkind.

To attempt to recount his adventures would be to fill a volume with a description of bad roads, hailstorms, punctures, and repeated disappointments. Nevertheless he eventually got on the

track of that peacock feather, and followed it up as surely as a bloodhound on the scent of his prey, though more than once he had to return on his own trail.

How Tommy kept on the scent at all was a marvel. It was by sheer perseverance, by following up every smallest clue, by letting no possible chance go untried. He was indefatigable, undoubting, and his chauffeur, hearing the story from Tommy's enthusiastic lips, warmed to the work, and played his part with a zest equal only to Tommy's own.

It was the third week of the search that they entered Congleton, which was, as we know, to cry "Hot!" as the children cry it in the game of hunt the thimble. But Tommy did not know it; and here, in spite of all inquiries, the clue appeared lost, vanished.

The wind was blowing, a deluge half of rain, half of sleet, descending. It being then seven o'clock or thereabouts, they decided after some parley to drive to a hotel, put up for the night, and renew the search in the morning. Some slight disarrangement in the internal organs of the car further decided them in the plan, though

the chauffeur averred that ten o'clock the following morning should see them again *en route*. Slightly depressed, however, Tommy retired to bed.

He was up betimes. In the night the weather had changed, and snow some inches deep lay upon the ground. Before daylight he was downstairs and in the street. There he met a sleepy milk-boy delivering milk. Tommy entered into casual conversation with him, questioning carelessly, unconcernedly, as his method was. And then suddenly the clue was once more in his hand.

Of course the boy had seen him—a man with a peacock feather in his hat and a dog at his heels—a queer dog, a bit of a mongrel, so the youngster announced. Now a dog of no kind had been in the category, but the peacock feather was assuredly unmistakable. Where, then, had the boy seen him? The previous evening, it appeared, walking towards the Cloud.

Tommy consulted his watch. It was now, so he discovered, about a quarter after seven. The car by arrangement did not make its appearance till ten. Tommy demurred within his soul, cogitated as to possibilities. Then with the

thought of further clues in his mind he started off a-foot towards the mountain. Presently the town lay well behind him, a wide road before him.

The crisp frosty air was exhilarating, the chance of success spurred him on. He passed a few houses. At the door of one a woman was emptying a pail of dirty water. Tommy stopped a moment to inquire. Luck, good fortune, was in his favour. A man such as he had described had passed up the road the previous evening, so the woman confidently averred. Hope beat high in Tommy's heart. Never before had he been so close on the track. It had been always three or four days old at the least.

Now the road became desolate of houses, a smooth expanse of unbroken snow lying between stone walls. After a while the road turned a bit to the left, and here there was a largish house—a farm-house, he judged—lying among trees. He passed it, the road still bearing to the left. Tommy plodded on. The sun was coming up in the east, a glowing ball of fire.

And then suddenly he saw a hut lying back from the road across a bit of moorland. In the

doorway a tall man was standing, a peacock feather in his hat, a white mongrel dog beside him.

Tommy's heart gave a sudden exultant leap. He turned sharply towards the hut.

CHAPTER XXX

THE RETURN

"How on earth did you find me?" demanded Peter, as the two descended the Cloud together, Democritus following in the rear.

"By the guidance of Providence," announced Tommy. "It's been the oddest search imaginable, and if it hadn't been for that blessed peacock feather I'll dare swear it had been fruitless. It was a kind of landmark, the one characteristic by which you had been noticed."

Peter laughed. He was at the moment extraordinarily, exuberantly happy. So can fate play shuttlecock with our lives.

At the hut door Tommy had given him the barest outline of the story, sufficient only to persuade Peter that he was indeed justified in accompanying the famished Tommy down the mountain-side. Now he elaborated those details, entered fully into the most miraculous history

of the last three weeks. And the story of Hugh's confession filled Peter with a curious exultation. He saw, as Father O'Sullivan had seen, the fine way, the grand way, in which the past had been blotted out and his friend given back to him in spirit.

Tommy strode down the mountain joyous of heart, his honest freckled face fairly shining with pleasure. His whole further programme was already arranged—the wires to be sent, the breakfast to be eaten, the train to be caught that was to convey them swiftly back to town. The car and chauffeur could follow at their leisure.

Here, however, Peter demurred. It was all very well to tramp the road in this ridiculous garb, but return to civilisation attired as a mountebank—never! There were some things at which Peter drew the line, and he drew one here, and firmly. Tommy was prepared for him; he met and overruled each and every objection. Had Peter no other garments in that bundle he was carrying? What! only a dress suit? Tommy opened eyes of wonder. What on earth was the use of a dress suit to a wayfarer? Oh, of course, it was Peter's own business if he *liked* to carry one

around the country in a bundle on his back for the mere pleasure of boasting to his soul that he possessed one. No, of course he couldn't wear it up to town. Tommy didn't propose that he should. But he—Tommy—had another suit at the hotel. Peter was much of his build; he'd take him to his room to change. During the process he'd dispatch telegrams. Then, Tommy presumed, he'd be allowed to have his breakfast, after which the train. He was obdurate on that point. Yes, Peter could have a bath if he liked—fifty baths, as long as he agreed to take the train at noon.

Thus planning, arranging, the hotel was reached. Tommy escorted Peter to his room, indicated a change of raiment and the bathroom opposite, then, bursting with excitement, proceeded to find the chauffeur and dispatch telegrams. Within ten minutes—such was his celerity of action—he was in the dining-room, had ordered a substantial breakfast, and was waiting with what patience he might for the appearance of Peter.

Peter, in the bathroom, was luxuriating in a sea of gloriously hot water, while Democritus kept guard without. Occasionally a wet black

nose was lowered to the crack beneath the door to sniff and wonder perplexedly at this new freak on the part of his master.

"It is certain," remarked Peter, full length in the bath, and addressing himself to the ceiling, "that if I'd once indulged in the luxury of a good hot soapy bath in a private bathroom after leaving the jail, wild horses would never have dragged me to the roads. I'd forgotten—completely forgotten—the joy of it!"

But at last, with a mental picture of the famished Tommy before his mind, he reluctantly proceeded to dry himself and don decent habiliments.

Tommy greeted the entrance of Peter and Democritus with fervent enthusiasm, and without more ado they proceeded to make good headway with the substantial, steaming breakfast which forthwith made its appearance.

"Heavens!" cried Peter presently, pausing in the consuming of eggs and bacon, toast, marmalade, and coffee, "was there ever such a breakfast before? And have I once tendered you my thanks for coming in pursuit of me? The whole miraculous business, the entire blessed

kaboodle, seems to have upset my mental equilibrium and clouded my manners."

"Bless the man!" cried Tommy, "don't I understand?"

Some couple of hours later the two, with Democritus, were in the train, sitting in a first-class carriage, which Tommy had bribed the guard to reserve to their sole use. Neither man desired the company of strangers at the moment. Under all their chaff and light-heartedness there was a sense of bigness, a feeling of something great accomplished.

Peter gazed through the carriage window at the snow-covered landscape, his mind a whirl of varied emotions. It is useless to attempt to say which was uppermost. Kaleidoscopic they revolved in his brain, a jumble of pleasure, relief, half-forgotten fatigue, expectation, though now through them all ran a thought of regret, of sadness—the thought of Anne.

Is ever the perfection of joy allowed to us mortals? It would appear not, mused Peter. Here was everything to his hand that his soul could desire, save the one thing after which it really hankered; and with that to his debit, the

balance—in spite of its appearance—was distinctly inadequate.

Tommy, gazing at him furtively from behind the morning paper, marvelled at the sudden melancholy of the man. Cogitating in his mind for the reason, and having heard from Muriel of Peter's previous engagement, he thought to have found it. If only, so meditated Tommy—no lover of Millicent—he could realize the escape he had had.

And so the train bore them onward, out of the snow-covered land, past bare brown fields and skeleton trees, past smoky towns and small villages lying in pale sunlight, on to the suburbs past whose platforms the train roared and rushed, on and ever onward, till London itself was reached.

CHAPTER XXXI

DEMOCRITUS ARRIVES TO STAY

GENERAL CARDEN in his smoking-room was listening, waiting. Fifty times already in the last half-hour he had looked over the curtain that veiled the lower half of the window. Fifty times he had looked at the clock on the mantelpiece and compared it with his watch.

An orange envelope lay on the table beside him, and with it a strip of pink paper. He knew the words thereon verbatim; certainly they were few in number:

“Found. Arrive Euston four o’clock to-day.
—LANCING.”

On the receipt of this brief missive General Carden’s heart had thumped violently. He had found voice to pass the good news on to the devoted Goring, but it was well on half an hour before voice and heart were under his normal control.

Muriel had descended on him radiant, trium-

phant, a-bubble with joy and glee, showering her congratulations.

"Come to Mrs. Cresswell's dance to-morrow night," she implored, "and bring him with you. I want to shake hands with Don Quixote. I have never before met him in the flesh." But behind this desire, and stronger than it, was the knowledge that Anne would be there, and, woman-like, she longed for an immediate meeting of the two.

"We'll see," promised General Carden, smiling indulgently as at a pleading child. In his heart he longed to parade London with his son and let the whole world be witness to his return, to their reunion.

Again he glanced at the clock. Any moment now! He tried to quell the tumult of expectation within him.

Dare one penetrate a little way into the mind of the reserved old man, guess at the tide of memory he had at last allowed to flow back to his heart? For years he had kept it relentlessly at its ebb, a long barren shore between him and its waters. He had feared to be submerged in its flood; he had feared that, should it approach him,

it would come swiftly, remorselessly, drowning him in its depths, choking the life out of him with a deadly, icy cold. Now, and now only, he realized the sweetness of its waters, realized that their approach would be not to submerge but to lift him on buoyant waves—waves warm, exuberant, joyous. Oh, it might come now, come in all its strength, come bearing life in its flow! No longer a barren, desolate shore between him and those waters. Throughout the day the wavelets had lapped ever softly, gently nearer. Now calmly, joyously, they lifted him on their surface.

There was the old house down in the country, with the pear-tree whose branches reached the window of that octagon-room. It should be restored, re-inhabited. There was the river that ran below its grounds, wherein speckled trout and silver salmon abounded. Many were the fish he had caught there, many the fish Peter had caught. What was to prevent them from catching more? Already in thought the speckled trout lay gasping on the bank, the silver salmon were giving play in the long reaches of water between the meadows. There was the shooting, too—the pheasants, the partridges, the snipe in the swampy

ground beyond the old mill, the wild duck where some seven miles distant the arm of the sea ran up to meet the river. The old days again! Memory carried him on her tide towards the future.

And then into the midst of his thoughts came a sound that brought his old heart fluttering to his throat—the sound of the front-door bell.

He held on to the arms of his chair, his eyes upon the door. It opened.

“Mr. Peter!” Goring’s voice was on a note of exultation.

And into the room came a tall, lean man, a mongrel dog at his heels.

“Hullo, father!”

“Well, my boy!”

There was a grip of hands. Then the old man was sitting again by the fire, Peter opposite to him. There was a little silence. Democritus, sniffing at the black, hairy hearthrug, was completely engrossed with his own occupation. In the silence the two men watched him.

Presently he curled down with a thump. A quivering sigh of satisfaction passed through his body.

“It is evident,” said Peter with a little laugh, “that Democritus has come to stay.”

CHAPTER XXXII

PER ASPERA AD ASTRA

“AND so,” quoth Peter, “when the two met again, he had a story to tell her.”

“Oh!” queried Anne, toying with her fan, the flimsy thing of mother-of-pearl and cobwebby old lace. “A long story?”

“That,” ventured Peter with temerity, “depended largely—I might say altogether—on his listener.”

They were sitting, these two, in a wide window-seat at the end of a passage. They had the full length of it before them. It was a post of vantage. With what generalship Peter had marked it out, with what fine diplomancy he had found Lady Anne and escorted her hither, is no doubt better imagined than recorded. It suffices to chronicle that here they were, in an alcove of soft draperies and shaded lights, listening—if they chose—to the

strains of music, watching—if they chose—the brilliant kaleidoscopic effect of colour through the open door of the great ballroom.

“My story,” continued Peter, “is of a Wanderer, one whom Fate in one of her freakish moods had wedded to the roads, the highways and hedges, the fields and woods.”

“Had he,” queried Anne, “nothing to solace him in his wanderings—no thoughts, no memories?”

“None,” said Peter steadily. “Once long ago Cupid had touched him with his wing—the merest flick of a feather. The man—poor fool!—fancied himself wounded, thought to bear a scar. Later, when he looked for it, he found there was none. It had been the most entire illusion on his part. And so he wandered the roads, regretting perhaps that he was scathless. But that is beside the mark.” He paused, glancing at the hands which held the flimsy cobwebby fan.

“One day,” continued Peter, “into his lonely wanderings came a letter, a mere scrap of bluish paper with tracings thereon of black ink. A flimsy fragile thing you might say, but to him it meant—well, everything. I fancy he had never

realized his entire loneliness till that delicate herald of joy appeared. And—here was the wonder of it—it was written by a woman.”

“Oh!” said Lady Anne, the little pulses fluttering in her throat.

“It was,” went on Peter, “a gracious letter, a charming letter, written by one who had guessed at his loneliness of spirit, and thought to cheer that loneliness, to heal the wound she fancied him to bear. To him it came as a draught of water to one in a waterless desert. It brought him help, refreshment. He began to dream a dream of the writer, to imagine her near him. He spent hours in the company of his Dream Lady. He was no longer lonely, no longer desolate. In spirit—in fancy, if you will—she was ever with him. Oh, he knew well enough that he could never meet her in the flesh, that was part of the compact. But disembodied though she was, she meant more to him than all the material friendships in creation.” Again he stopped, his heart was beating fast.

“And then?” questioned Lady Anne.

He drew a deep breath. “And then Fate played a trick—a curious, almost incredible trick, Fate threw the woman in his path. Their meet-

ing was strange, picturesque—I might almost call it unique. At the moment reason did not tell him the woman was the writer of the letters, but his soul, I believe, guessed. And presently he knew without a doubt his soul was right.”

“Ah!” breathed Lady Anne. “He knew the writer of the letters to him, but she did not know who answered them.”

“She did not,” echoed Peter.

There was a little pause.

“Then,” she asked, her eyes still upon her fan, “I suppose he told her what he knew?”

“No,” said Peter in a low voice, “he did not. There is no excuse for him. I myself make none. But—he feared to lose her letters. There’s the whole matter in a nutshell. He did not tell her, and he continued to write.”

“Oh!” said Lady Anne. Again there was a pause.

“Of course,” continued Peter, “it was inexcusable of him. But Fate had his punishment in store.”

“Yes?” she queried.

“Fate disclosed his trickery to the woman. He read his punishment in the contempt in her

eyes. He deserved it, every bit of it. But it hurt none the less."

"And—and then what happened?" she asked, trembling.

"He went away," said Peter. "First he made a sacrifice—a small funeral pyre on which he burnt her letters, and I fancy his heart."

"Did he do nothing else?" she demanded.

"Oh, yes," confessed Peter. "He wrote to her. It was the least he could do. He prayed her forgiveness."

"And—?" she queried.

Again Peter drew a deep breath. "After that there were months of a greater loneliness. I fancy he tried to be brave, to be worthy of her memory. She was, you see, his star."

"Did—did he not condemn her for her harshness?" asked Lady Anne.

"Never," cried Peter hotly. "She was to him his goddess, his divinity." He stopped.

"Is that all?" she asked.

"No," said Peter. "Fate had another surprise in store. She brought him from his loneliness, set him again in the midst of his fellow-men. But that was not all—it was the least. He

found"—Peter's heart beat to suffocation—"a letter—one that should have reached him long ago but for his own folly. From it he dared to believe, to hope, that his Lady had condoned his offence, had forgiven."

Lady Anne did not reply. Peter looked at her.

"Had she forgiven?" he pleaded.

For a second—the merest fraction of a second—she raised her eyes to his.

"I—I think so," she said. And a tiny adorable smile curved her mouth. "Is that all the story?" she questioned in a low voice after a little silence.

"Oh no," said Peter.

"No?" she asked, surprised. "I fancied it was the end."

"It is," said Peter boldly, "only the beginning."

"Oh!" she asked with delicately raised eyebrows; "and—and is the rest of the story long?"

"It is," said Peter, "as long as a lifetime, and longer. It stretches away into Eternity. It is a story of his love for his Lady, his Queen. She is immeasurably more to him than all in earth and heaven. With every fibre of his being, with his body, his soul, his spirit, he loves, worships, and

adores. It is a story that will take a lifetime in the telling. Dare he tell it? Is she, think you, willing to listen?"

Lady Anne again raised her eyes to his.

"You're sure," she queried, "that he wants her to listen?"

"Absolutely sure," said Peter, his blue eyes holding hers.

"Then," breathed Lady Anne softly, "tell her."

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